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THE FIRE-EATER.

CHAPTER I.

SLEIGHT OF HAND.

IN the rough, dirty bar-room of a Texas tavern, stood a young man, leaning against the counter.

A little above the medium hight, he looked taller than he really was, being perfectly proportioned, with a frame that suggested a full supply of muscle, as well as of nerve and brain power.

From his easy and self-assured attitude as he stood at the counter, you would have taken him for a man who could make himself at home anywhere, and easily adapt himself to any situation, or, if necessary, change the situation to suit his wish.

His blue eyes, expressive of intelligence and amiability, wandered carelessly about the room, but took in the minutest detail of every person and article it contained.

He was dressed in a plain but well-fitting suit of corduroy, consisting of short sack, vest and pantaloons. His pantaloons were thrust into the tall tops of a pair of stout Russia leather boots. His brown hair was covered by a dark felt hat, that partially shaded his fine features. In a belt at his waist were stuck two six-shooters in sheaths, and behind was a bowie-knife, also in a sheath, showing that he had learned what constituted the most important part of Texas costume.

He was watching a game of seven-up, that was being played at a rough table near the counter, by two men. One of them was a burly, broad-faced man, who looked as if he might be the owner of a stock ranch. The other was a small, wiry man, with grizzled hair and beard, keen gray eyes, thin lips, and a hard set of features.

Each had a pile of gold and silver on the table; but the pile of the big man was steadily decreasing, while that of his

opponent was increasing. The big man suspected his opponent of cheating, but was unable to catch him in the act.

At last, when a game happened to be running against the small man, he laid down his cards, and declared that there had been a misdeal.

"Not this time, stranger," replied the other.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that thar hain't been any misdeal this time."

"But you know that I have played on each of those four tricks, and I have three cards left."

"Like enough; but you may as well go ahead, and say nothin' more about it."

"I reckon I will throw up my hand when I discover a misdeal."

"But there hain't been no misdeal, I tell you."

"Do you mean to accuse me of cheating?"

There were several other persons in the room—rough, heavily-bearded men, who were chatting together, drinking occasionally, and now and then wrangling a little; but they were very civil even in their quarrels. All were armed to the teeth, and it was probably the knowledge that death would follow an affront, that made them so punctiliously polite in their intercourse with each other, whatever their inward feelings may have been. As the dispute at the card-table seemed to offer a possibility of resulting in something serious, they edged toward the disputants, and clustered around them.

"I ask you, Rube Warnick, if you mean to accuse me of cheating," said the smaller man.

"I tell you, Rafe Stinson, that I dealt you six keards and no more, and I believe that you pulled that three of clubs out of your sleeve. Didn't you see him do it, stranger?"

This question was addressed to the young man who was standing at the counter, and he nodded his head in reply.

"Do I understand you to say that you saw me pull a card out of my sleeve?" asked Stinson, as he rose from his seat.

"You may so understand me, if you wish to," quietly replied the young man. "I did see you pull the card out of your sleeve."

"What business of yours was it to watch our game and interfere with it?"

"None at all."

"Why did you do it, then?"

"I really do not know. Was not aware that I had done so."

"A pretty sort of a sneak you are, to spy about and deny it. What is your name?"

"Charles Archer, at your service."

"What State did you come from?"

"Several of them—none in particular."

"What State were you born in?"

"In no State."

"Are you a foreigner, then?"

"I am not. I am an American born citizen."

"That is durned queer talk."

"Nevertheless, it is as straight as a shingle."

"Ef you warn't born in the States, stranger," said one of the bystanders, "and warn't born in any furren kentry, will you please tell me whar you war born?"

"With pleasure, sir. I was born at sea, on a man-of-war."

"Durned ef I'd ever hev guessed that," said the querist, as he turned away, and Stinson returned to the attack.

"I want to know, young man, what business you had interfering with my game."

"Really, my friend, I am afraid that you are inclined to be unreasonable," said Archer, with a pleasant smile.

"I have satisfied your curiosity, and you ought to be content. If you are hunting a quarrel, you are on the wrong trail, as I am not the man with whom you were playing cards."

"*He* didn't accuse me of cheating, and you said that I pulled a card out of my sleeve."

"Very well. He has withdrawn his stake, and that ought to end the matter."

"That's right enough; but I want to let you know that I don't permit any sneaking, prying Yankee to meddle with my game. If he undertakes to do it, he must suffer for it."

"My dear sir, you are becoming tiresome, and you are so uncivil that I am afraid you wish to provoke a quarrel. Do you

want a fight? If so, what kind of a fight? Let me show you something before you go any further."

The young man took a tallow candle from the bar, lighted it, and set it on a shelf in the corner of the room.

"Can you snuff that candle," he asked, "at this distance, with a six-shooter?"

Stinson sneered.

"I will show you how it is done."

Archer drew a pistol from his belt, leveled it at the candle, and fired. The bullet cut the wick just above the tallow, extinguishing the light.

As the shot was fired, a door at the end of the bar was partly opened, and a girl stood in the opening—a girl seventeen or eighteen years of age, beautiful in form and feature, dressed in a style that was quite unusual in that country. Her large dark eyes, opened wide, showed surprise and fear, and her right hand was held up with a warning gesture as she caught Archer's eye.

"What in thunder do you want here?" angrily asked the burly, one-eyed man behind the bar, who was known as Bill Dare, and who was the proprietor of the establishment.

"Nothing," she replied, in a tone of such sweetness and melody that it was like a sunbeam dropping into a den of darkness.

"Run away, then, Nell—that's a good girl. This is no place for women-folks."

The girl withdrew, and closed the door, after giving Archer a warning glance, which he answered with a pleasant smile.

"A bad shot!" he exclaimed, with an impatient gesture, returning the pistol to his belt. "My nerves are not as steady to-night as they ought to be."

"I would like to see the man who could beat it," said Rube Warnick, who had stepped to the corner, and was examining the hole made in the partition by the bullet.

"Let me show you another trick."

Archer tore off a small piece of white paper, and fastened it with a pin to the partition, where the light would fall upon it. He then stepped ten paces from the mark, and drew from

its sheath a horn-handled bowie-knife, with a heavy, keen blade, eight inches in length.

Holding the handle in the palm of his hand, with the point toward the hollow of his elbow, he raised his arm quickly, turned his hand, and launched the weapon at the mark. It struck the paper in the middle, bending the pin to one side, and buried itself in the wood so deep, that it stood there, quivering.

"An Injun couldn't do better'n that with his tomahawk," said Rube Warnick, and the others expressed their admiration of the feat by staring at Archer.

The young man drew the knife from the wood, and turned around, facing the bystanders.

Instead of returning it to its sheath, he threw it into his mouth, point downward, and swallowed it with a gulp. A shout of surprise and consternation burst from the lips of all present.

"Did you really swallow that knife, stranger?" asked Rube Warnick.

"Of course I did. It don't hurt me to swallow knives, as I am hollow all the way through. It will get down into my boot pretty soon, if it is not there already. Let me see."

Archer sat down, pulled off his right boot, and shook out the knife, which he put back in its sheath. No sooner had he done so, than he started back, with an exclamation of alarm, and clapped his hand to his head. The next instant the point of the knife was seen sticking up through the top of his hat. He removed the hat, and took out the knife, but dropped it as if it had burned his fingers, and it fell on the floor. Then he sat down, and spoke to it coaxingly, and it jumped into his hand. He again put it in the sheath, and had no more trouble with it.

"You'll do, stranger!" exclaimed Rube Warnick, slapping him on the back. "Ef any body wants to hunt a quarrel, I reckon you ain't the man he is lookin' fur. Who and what are you, anyhow?"

"I have already told you that my name is Charles Archer. I am any thing and every thing, except a land-surveyor."

"If you are not a land-surveyor, I am glad to see you," said Stinson, extending his hand. "I suspected that you

were one of those infernal land-sharks, who come here to prey on the honest settlers. I hope you have no grudge against me."

"None at all, sir. I had rather make friends than enemies, any day."

"You're all right, then, stranger," said Warnick. "Jest you stay with us, and we'll make a night of it."

"Thank you, sir; but I am pretty tired, and I propose to make a night of it in sleep, if our landlord can accommodate me with a bed."

CHAPTER II.

TWO PLOTTERS.

ALTHOUGH Charles Archer proposed to spend the night in sleep, he did not seek his "roost," as Bill Dare termed the room which he assigned to his guest, until the night was nearly half-spent. In the meantime he remained in the bar-room, conversing with the men there, and amusing them with feats of legerdemain, in which he was assisted, to a certain extent, by a gigantic negro, named Tophet, and a reddish-brown, black muzzled staghound, named Wolf, both of whom had come to Dare's tavern in his company.

It was almost a matter of necessity, while he remained in the bar-room, that he should join the Texans in the "treats" that were frequently proposed; but it might have been observed that he touched the bottle very lightly, and it is certain that he was none the worse for his occasional libations.

Gradually the loungers dropped off, and Archer retired to his room, leaving but two or three of them behind.

Dare's tavern was a frail two-story concern, built of rough boards, set up on end, box-fashion, with plenty of cracks to let in the light and air. In the rear of this building was an ell, built in the same fashion.

Archer's room was directly over the bar, and was reached by a step-ladder, which he ascended, followed by his big dog

and the still bigger African. Archer carried a couple of rifles, and Tophet lugged a couple of heavy blankets.

The room contained a sort of truckle-bed, on which was a shake-down of corn shucks, with some blankets for covering. As there was no lock on the door, Tophet laid down at the foot of it, wrapped in his blankets, and Wolf laid at his side.

The heavy breathing of the negro soon testified that he was sound asleep, and the dog was evidently dreaming of an exciting hunt; but sleep did not so easily close the eyelids of the white man.

He was haunted by the face that he had seen in the opening of the door at the end of the bar, just after he had fired his pistol at the candle. It was a face that might easily haunt an impressible and imaginative man. The girl's large, dark eyes, and her finely-molded features, spoke of little sympathy with her surroundings. There was also an expression of melancholy on that intelligent face, that touched young Archer to the quick, and set him to meditating and wondering and half-way hoping—he hardly knew what.

Who and what was this girl! It could not be possible that she was the daughter of the rough, bloated, unintelligent man who kept the tavern. It was certain that she was in no way related to the flat-faced half-breed woman whom he called his wife. There was something about her that suggested gentle birth and delicate nurturing. There were possibilities, too, of a life that would soar far above her present coarse surroundings. Was it the yearning for a better life that gave a cast of melancholy to those fine features, that imparted a tinge of sadness to those wonderful dark eyes? We are told, by those who believe in pre-existence, that much of our sadness is caused by mournful memories of a former blissful life, to which we long to return. So the melancholy of Nelly Dare, Archer thought, might be caused by sad and misty memories of a happy babyhood.

He caught himself wishing that it might be in his power to restore her to the sphere in which, according to his active imagination, she surely belonged. He wanted to know more about her, to converse with her, to hear from her own lips the history of her years, to make sure that she possessed the mind and the heart which he believed to be hers; but he was

compelled to journey toward the north, on important business that admitted of no delay, and he could not stop to admire and analyze this rare and beautiful wild-flower that grew by his path.

He had nearly fallen into a doze, when he was aroused by the sound of voices in the room below. A few words that were spoken brought him to a sitting posture, and in a moment he was wide awake and anxious to hear more.

He got out of bed and went softly to the corner of the room that was nearest to the sound of the voices. He laid down on the floor, and placed his ear to a crack, so that he could hear nearly all that was said.

The speakers were Rafe Stinson and Bill Dare.

Archer believed that the former cherished a grudge against him, and he had no doubt that the latter was a ruffian by nature and practice, a man to whom honesty was unknown.

"I tell you, Rafe," said the landlord, "I don't like to see that style of folks comin' into the country."

"If their pockets are well filled, I shouldn't think you would object," replied the other.

"If they keep comin' in, a man won't have a chance to get hold of a pocket-book or to run off a drove of hosses, without gettin' into trouble. They'll be startin' courts and buildin' jails. When such fellers get to be plenty, the next thing is Regulators."

"And you hate Regulators even more than you hate courts and jails. The business is pretty good yet, old man, and that young chap will learn something about it before he gets much further. When shall we go through him, do you say?"

"To-morrer mornin'. I'd do it to-night, right here; but that big nigger and a dog are in the room with him, and there wouldn't be any gettin' near him without raisin' the biggest kind of a row, and somebody might get hurt."

"Like enough. He is a quick and sure hand with his weapons, and it would be safe to take him at an advantage. I wonder if he would be worth the risk?"

"He's got the shiners, I reckon. His rig ain't very fine; but there's style into it. You don't often see a chap hold his head so high, unless he has got the cash to back him."

"Are you sure that he will take the road across the prairies?"

"Yes. He was askin' the way to Vallecito, Cap'n Burnham's ranch, and said that he had to go there this mornin'. You can lay for him at the motte, just at the end of the big perairie, and the game is sure."

"I wonder what he is going to Vallecito for? Perhaps he is in some way connected with the people who are about to move there."

"Who are they?"

"The name is Worsham, I believe. Burnham sold to Colonel Worsham, of Louisiana."

Bill Dare started back, and his eyes opened to their fullest extent.

"Colonel Worsham, of Louisiana!" he exclaimed.

"That is the name, I am sure. What is the matter with you? Do you know any thing about him?"

"I have heerd the name. Yes; I reckon that I do know somethin' about him. I want to talk to you about that matter some time, Rafe, but not now."

"Just now I want to talk to you about Nelly. It is time that that matter was settled. She is to be my wife, you know."

"Ye-ye-es."

"No ifs or ands about it, old man. You know that the boys would tear you limbless, if I should tell them that you had tried to give them up to the Regulators."

"I wish I had never done that, Cap. I never would have done it, if I hadn't been half drunk and all mad. Don't you reckon they would be willin' to pass it over at this late day?"

"They would be willing to pass a rope over a handy limb of the nearest tree, with you at the end of it."

"That was a bad piece of business. You see, Cap, I've been hopin' and workin' and waitin' for a chance to send Nelly off somewhere, where she can be taught better things than she is likely to learn about here. Next fall I mean to send her to Austin, or Galveston, or somewhere, sure."

"You have been saying that same thing, Bill Dare, for the last three or four years. You will keep on saying it and never doing it. The girl knows as much as I care for my wife to know, and I am ready to take her off your hands right now."

"You know, Rafe, that Nelly don't fancy you."

"Fancy has nothing to do with the matter. After she is my wife, she will be bound to like me, and she must be my wife."

"We must go slow, Cap. It won't do to skeer the gal. We must break her in by degrees."

"I am tired of that foolishness. I can break her in quick enough, once she is my wife. I won't be put off any longer, Bill Dare. There must be a day set, and she must marry me, or you will get into trouble. That's the long and short of it."

"Fact is, Rafe, that she flies into such a tantrum whenever I mention your name, that I'm afeard to press her on that p'int. She kinder gets me down, with her cryin' and her play-actin' airs. Can't it be managed some other way? Supposin' you should get hold of her some day, unbeknown to me as it mought be, and run off with her. Then you could marry her, and she wouldn't have any cause to fall afool of me."

"Well, Bill Dare, you *are* a coward!"

"I ain't ashamed to confess, Rafe, that I'm kinder afeard of that gal, sometimes."

"Afraid of your own child?"

"Looks like it—don't it?"

"It makes me doubt whether she is your child. But that is no affair of mine. I am ready to marry her here, or to run off with her, if that will suit you the best. I can plan it so that she will never accuse you of having any thing to do with the matter, but will believe that you have done all you could to prevent me from getting and keeping her."

"That's the notion, Cap, and we will fix it up after we get through with the young chap up-stairs. You had better be movin' now, and get the boys ready for the work in the mornin'."

"They will be on hand in time, and I will settle that fellow. I don't like the way Nell looked at him, anyhow."

The two Texans separated, and Archer crawled back into his bed.

"This is not the first time that Tophet and Wolf have saved me from trouble," he mutt re! "Those two rascals

would have got more cuts than cash, if they had tried to go through me to-night. They may think they are sure of their game in the morning; but they will find that it is one thing to set a trap, and quite another to catch the bird. That sneaking, blackavised, bloody-minded fellow, who tried to pick a quarrel with me, is to marry that girl--is he? I wish I could know when he means to play his game of carrying her off. She might be sure of having one friend to help her, and there might be a funeral in Mr. Rafe Stinson's family. But I must go on and attend to my work, and he will have his own way, no doubt, when I am gone."

Thus musing, Archer fell asleep, and slept soundly until near sunrise.

CHAPTER III.

NELL DARE AND THE LONE HUT.

"WELCOME the coming, speed the parting guest," must have been the motto of the landlord of Dare's tavern, to judge by the haste that he made to get Archer his breakfast and to start him on his journey.

He repeated the directions that he had given the young man for finding his way to Vallecito, especially charging him to take the left hand, where the roads forked, and to keep straight on across the prairie.

Archer looked around, when he had mounted his horse, hoping to catch a glimpse of Neil Dare; but he did not see as much as the hem of her dress or a tress of her hair, and he went his way, after shaking hands with his treacherous host, who bid him a hearty farewell.

Archer took the lead of his little party, mounted on a bay horse of excellent wind and action, a cross between the Texas mustang and the blooded horse of the States. After him came the negro, with two loaded pack mules. The dog was ahead of the men, or behind them, or on one side or the other as suited his fancy.

Tophet, the negro, was a giant in size and strength. His

skin was as black as coal, and his features had the genuine African characteristics. Unlike most of his race, he was peculiarly taciturn and reserved, seldom speaking unless he was spoken to.

On this occasion he was disposed to say something, and he rode up by the side of Archer to say it.

"Gwine to Vall'cito, Mass'r Charley?" he asked.

"No. Of course not."

"Said you was."

"Are you growing stupid, Tophe? I saw that we had fallen among thieves, and I determined that those buzzards should not have the picking of our carcasses. So I was particular to ask directions for the very route that I did not intend to pursue. They will look for us at the other side of the prairie; but they will hardly find us there."

"Takes *you*, Mass'r Charley."

The negro fell back, and was silent a few moments. Then he ranged up by the side of the young man, and spoke to him again.

"Mons'ous purty gal back yonder, Mass'r Charley."

"She is strangely beautiful."

"'Pears to me I've seen somebody like her."

"She is like nothing I ever saw before. If I should get into trouble here, Tophe, would you stand by me?"

"Yes, *sah!*"

"If the trouble should be about that girl, would you help me and her?"

"Bet high!"

"I may have to try you, before many days. Here the road forks. As those people believe that we mean to cross the prairie, we will go the other way."

The young man took the road that led to the right, through the timber that skirted a small stream, and the party rode on in silence, until Archer's quick ear caught the sound of horse-hoofs coming from the opposite direction, and he suddenly halted. Tophet also stopped in his place, and Wolf stood still, checking a half-uttered growl.

A musical humming was heard in the air just ahead of them, and a gray horse appeared at a bend of the road. On the back of the gray horse was Nell Dare!

She pulled up her horse as she came in sight of the party, and Archer rode forward, raising his hat as gracefully as if he were addressing a dainty belle of civilization.

"Good-morning, Miss Nelly," he said. "You ride early."

"You, also, are an early rider," she replied, an expression of anxiety shading her beautiful features. "Why have you taken this road? I thought you were going to Vallecito."

"Did you ever hear of lions, young lady?"

A flush of indignation burned on her cheeks.

"You may make fun of me if you wish to," she said. "I can't help myself. But I am not quite as ignorant, perhaps, as you suppose me to be. I *have* heard of lions."

"I was afraid that I might find lions in my path, if my course should be known, and I used a little strategy. I had no intention of going to Vallecito, and you may tell them so when you get home."

"Tell whom?"

"The lions."

"You are still laughing at me. If you knew how troubled I have been about you, you would not speak to me in that way."

"What has troubled you?" asked Archer, changing his tone.

"I was afraid they would kill you last night, and I was sure that they meant to lay for you this morning, on the road to Vallecito. I knew that they meant to do that, because father sent me off to Morgan's ranch so early this morning. He never does that, except when he wants to get me out of the way. But I was so troubled about you, that I came back as quick as I could, hoping to meet you before you had got too far."

"Are they in the habit of waylaying travelers?"

"It has been done before now."

"Were you troubled about me, more than about the others?"

"I don't want any man hurt or treated badly, and"—the girl blushed—"you had spoken kindly to me, and it isn't often that anybody does that. I couldn't bear to think that those wretches might kill you."

"I am very thankful to you for having thought of my danger, and I may be able to show you, some time, how thankful I am. Let me tell you one thing now. I overheard two men

talking last night—your father and Stinson. I learned all about the little game that they expected to play for my benefit, and was glad that I had put them on the wrong scent. You need have no fears concerning my safety. But I heard something more than that. Your danger is much greater than mine."

"My danger! What do you mean?"

Archer repeated the substance of the conversation between Bill Dare and Rafe Stinson, as far as it related to her. Before he had finished, her lips were compressed, her brows were drawn down, and there was a fierce glare in her eyes, that boded ill to any one that should attempt to wrong her.

"I thank you, sir," she said. "I know that father wants me to marry that man; but I had not supposed that he would stoop to such a trick. I *hate* Rafe Stinson, and sometimes feel as if I could kill him."

"Between them they may do you a wrong. You are a girl and alone, and they are two men. Had you not better leave this place? I can tell you where you will be safe."

"You mean well, sir, no doubt; but you ought not to speak to me in that way. I must not leave father."

"Is he your father?"

"I suppose so. Why do you ask?"

"You are so unlike him."

"Girls are always unlike men, and folks of the same family are as unlike as any other folks. I am glad that you have told me of this, as I now know what I must look out for, and I will look out sharp. They had better not push me too far."

"When I return this way I will stop at the tavern."

"I will be glad to see you, sir, if I am there—very glad indeed; but it is a dangerous place, and you had better keep away. I want to ask you one question. If you know that man who calls himself Rube Wannick, who is he?"

"He is a man whom you may depend upon. If you need help, and I think you will, you have only to say to him that you have heard from Charley, and he will go to the death for you."

"Thank you. Farewell, sir and may God take care of you."

With these words the girl struck her horse and dashed away.

"I don't mean to drop this business quite so easily," muttered Archer, when he had watched her out of sight. "I will be back here before many days, and Mr. Rafe Stinson may have a chance to cross swords with me. Come, Toph; these horses must get over many a mile of ground before night."

The young man followed the creek a few miles further, and then turned toward the north-west, his course pointing toward a tall peak that rose, grim and gray, in the distance.

Before night he had reached the base of the peak, and had struck camp in a pleasant valley, by the side of a clear stream that issued from the foot of the hills. After the horses had been unloaded and turned loose to graze, he left Wolf in charge of the camp, and walked up the hill with the negro.

The side of the mountain was a succession of irregular terraces, pretty heavily timbered in some places, and in others presenting only bare rock. Archer, as he ascended, stopped every now and then, to examine carefully the region behind and on each side of him, and to consult a memorandum that he took from his pocket.

At last, when he reached a broad terrace, where large trees were growing thickly among the broken stone, with patches of green turf scattered here and there, he uttered an exclamation of delight, that brought the negro running to his side.

"This is the place, old Tophet," he said. "We could not possibly have done better, if we had known the country all our lives. We ought to have a premium, old boy, for having done our work so well. Don't you see the opening yonder, where that tree has fallen down by the side of the hill?"

"Takes *you*, Mass'r Charley," replied the negro, with a grin that seemed to split his face in two.

The opening of which Archer had spoken was a place where the mountain appeared to divide, leaving a wide and deep chasm, which the white man and the black man entered, wondering at its beauty and sublimity.

The entrance was narrow; but the valley included in the chasm was a quarter of a mile in width at the widest part,

and was nearly shut in by the tall and frowning cliffs, that seemed to have been placed there for the purpose of hiding and guarding that delightful spot of greenery.

Right in the middle was a lonely lake, such as are often seen in the three Parks and in other parts of the Rocky Mountains. Around the lake the ground was rich and soft, thickly carpeted with the succulent buffalo-grass, with only here and there a boulder or a large mass of stone detached from the cliff, that set off the beauty of the spot, instead of marring it.

The water of the lake found an outlet in a clear and gentle stream, that rippled over the rocks at the entrance to the valley, and divided at the mountain side into two rills, that tumbled and trickled down their rugged way, until they reunited at the base of the hill.

Archer led his companion around the lake, toward the upper end of the valley, until he turned a sharp spur of the cliff, that jutted out into the greensward.

Then, in a snug recess between the rocky walls, was a small cabin, one side of which was formed by the cliff, and the other three were built up of the loose stones that abounded in the vicinity. A door, made of rough, split slabs, and originally fastened to a heavy post by wooden hinges, had fallen from its place, and lay in front of the opening which it had been intended to close. A bark roof, with which the cabin had once been covered, had rotted, and lay in fragments on the earthen floor.

"This is the place, old boy," said Archer, turning to the negro. "You will have no trouble in finding your way to it now, and there are plenty of hiding places about here, if you should need them. The hut must not be molested in any way, and you must leave every thing exactly as it is. Don't make any more trails than you can help, and be sure that you keep your eyes and ears open while you are awake. When you sleep, you must make Wolf watch. I can't tell when that man may come; but I believe that he will be here before long. When he comes, you must know every thing that he does while he is here, and you must know what becomes of him when he goes away. If he dies, you must trap him and keep him."

" 'Tain't much chance to find Miss May 'bout yer," said the negro.

" I don't look for her here ; but we may find some one who will take us to her, if she is living. If you find out any thing for certain, you must write it on a little slip of paper, as I told you before, and put it in one of the oil-cloth bags, and tie it around Wolf's neck, and send him to find me. It is a good thing for Colonel Worsham that he let you learn to write. I will make a *cache* for the packs, and will leave out as much powder and ball as you can possibly need."

" All right, Mass'r Charley."

" Come, now ; let us go down and cook our suppers."

CHAPTER IV.

CHARLEY AND HIS FRIENDS.

COLONEL WORSHAM had made his camp at the summit of a prairie ridge, if one of those billowy swells by which the vast expanse was varied could be called a ridge.

His wagons were drawn up in a circle, leaving only a narrow opening, protected by ropes and packs. All the horses and cattle were within the circle, as well as the colonel and his family and his black servants and white assistants—all except two armed men, who patrolled the camp outside of the circle of wagons, and who kept such good watch that there was no danger of a surprise or a stampede of the train.

Colonel Worsham's family consisted of his wife, his son Thomas, and his orphan niece, Emma Langley. His wife was a fine-looking, dignified woman, with a careworn expression of countenance. Tom was a tall, athletic young man of twenty-five, fond of hunting and adventure, but is absent when we enter the camp. Emma Langley was a very pretty blonde of nineteen, who had no fancy for hunting, who was afraid of adventure, and who devotedly loved her uncle and aunt and her cousin Tom.

Colonel Worsham was a stout, well-preserved gentleman of

fifty-two, who had served his country in a military capacity, and had had some experience in Indian warfare. Having met with some reverses in Louisiana, which had impaired his fortune, he had purchased the Burnham ranch, in western Texas, with the large tract of land attached to it, and was removing thither, for the purpose of trying his fortune in that then wild and unsettled region.

The sun was settin', and the negroes were busily engaged in cooking the evening meal, when one of the sentinels announced that a horseman was approaching the camp from the west. Such intelligence being as exciting upon the prairie ocean as the announcement of an approaching ship would be upon the broad blue water, all who were at leisure turned out to view the new-comer, although he was but a solitary horseman, from whom no danger was to be apprehended.

The stranger had been riding at an easy gait; but, as he approached the camp, he put his horse to his full speed, and galloped up in the wild and frantic fashion of the prairie Indians. As soon as he was near enough to be recognized, a general yell was sent up by the darkeys, little and big.

"Mass'r Charley! Mass'r Charley!" they shouted, screaming with delight, and tumbling over each other in their anxiety to welcome the horseman.

Leaping to the ground, he threw his bridle-rein to a negro man who was waiting to catch it, while another seized his rifle, and another took possession of his blanket. He made his way through the press as well as he could, liberally distributing hand-shakes and pleasant words, until he reached the entrance to the camp where Colonel Worsham and his family were waiting to welcome him.

Their welcome was more than cordial, and tears stood in the eyes of Mrs. Worsham as she seized both the hands of the new-comer, who was no other than Charles Archer.

"How did you get through, and how did you happen to find us?" eagerly asked the Colonel. "What have you done with Tophet and Wolf?"

"I left them where they ought to be. I will tell you all about it after a while. I am all right, as you see. Where is Tom?"

"Tom went out to hunt, as usual. He does that nearly every day, and keeps us well supplied with game."

"Tom ought to know what he is about; but I don't like that. You are in a dangerous country now, and I have seen the trail of more than one party of Indians. No one ought to leave the camp alone."

"But you have come a long distance alone, my boy."

"I was obliged to do so, and I think that I know rather more about the Indians and their ways than Tom knows. He ought to be back in camp by this time, it seems to me."

"He has often been out later than this, and has never missed the camp."

"I hope he will soon come in. But I am talking foolishly, and am distressing little Em. Tom knows what he is about, and he will come in when he gets ready. What have you got to eat? It makes no difference to me what it is, if there is plenty of it. I am as hungry as a coyote."

"There is plenty of it, Charley, and it is ready," said Mrs. Worsham, who had been overseeing the cookery. "You may pitch in, and then you may turn in, as we prairie travelers say."

Archer "pitched in" in earnest, and demolished the buffalo meat with a true hunter's appetite; but it was not so easy for him to "turn in" when supper was finished.

The negroes had got Mrs. Worsham off to one side of the camp, and clustered around her, evidently begging a favor which she was unwilling to grant. Soon she left them, with a smile on her face, and came to where Archer was seated with her husband and Emma Langley.

"I don't like to trouble you with such nonsense, Charley," she said; "but the people have been begging me to persuade you to give them some fun—'just a lilly bit,' they say. I have told them that you are tired and need rest; but they say that it is so long since they have seen you, and—in fact, they wouldn't let me off until I promised to ask you."

"Bring them along, by all means—big and little, he and she," said Archer. "Bring them along, and I will give them some small doses of the biggest kind of fun. I am in such a good humor to-night, that I want to please somebody,

and they are more easily made happy than anybody I know of."

At a signal from Mrs. Worsham, the negroes came trooping up, their faces fairly beaming, and joy oozing out at every pore. Archer, after a little preliminary arrangement, gave them a sleight-of-hand performance, with ventriloquial accompaniments, that would have done credit to a strolling performer. His black audience were thrown into an ecstacy of delight, which they evinced by unlimited applause and extravagant antics. Charley Archer appeared to be nearly as much pleased with the performance as they were, and did not suspend operations until Mrs. Worsham told her people that they had had fun enough for one night, and they went away, declaring that "Mass'r Charley" was "de berry debbil," and that "der nebber warn't nobody like him."

When they were gone, Archer lighted a pipe, after obsequiously asking permission of Emma Langley, and seated himself for a quiet smoke.

"You might have made a good living, Charley, as a leger-demain performer," said Colonel Worsham. "You were a mere boy when you learned those tricks, and it was wonderful how quickly you picked them up."

"I thought it possible, then, that the time might come when I would be obliged to turn my skill to profit," replied Archer; "but your kindness precluded any such necessity, and I can never be sufficiently grateful to you for your care of a poor orphan."

"You have already repaid us tenfold for our care, and you could not be nearer to us if you were our own son. But you have told us nothing as yet, of yourself. You have had a perilous journey, no doubt, and have met with many adventures, all of which we are anxious to hear. I can not help wondering how you contrived to find us, coming across the country with no guide to our whereabouts. Why, I would as soon undertake to search for a needle in a haystack, as for one train in the midst of these vast prairies. How did you do it, my boy?"

"That is more than I can tell you, sir. I have had the most wonderful luck all through. I call it luck, as the easiest name to give it, though I am thankful to Providence for

my good fortune, and ascribe no portion of it to chance. It is my wonderful luck that puts me in such good humor. I left Tophet and Wolf many, many miles from here, and set out across the wilderness alone, with no road to follow, with no guide but the sun and the stars, and with only a vague idea of the route you were to take. I crossed Indian trails; but have not even seen an enemy. Whenever I was hungry, there was game at hand, ready for me to kill and eat. I pushed on and on, without the least thought of danger or of failing in the object with which I had set out; but with a full reliance on Providence, and with a firm belief that I would succeed in finding you. As you perceive, I came straight to your camp, as if I had had my eye on it from the hour I started."

"That was wonderful luck, indeed, if we may give it that name," remarked Mrs. Worsham.

"I have had the same luck all through. The trace that the Frenchman gave us was faint enough; but it grew broader and brighter as soon as I entered upon the investigation. It is now thirteen years—is it not?—since your overseer ran away, taking with him little May and twenty thousand dollars in money."

"It is thirteen years," replied Colonel Worsham. "He had a bitter revenge for his whipping, though the scoundrel deserved every lash."

"The Frenchman could tell us little besides the fact that he went to Texas, and landed at Galveston. He had not even changed his name, and I found several men who remembered William Nevins. He had turned the Louisiana money into gold, and had gone up the country to purchase land, as he said.

"The clue was lost, then; but I learned more about him as I made further inquiries, and at last heard of a man, named Paul Landsden, who had been his particular friend and partner. This man, I was told, might possibly be found in the neighborhood of Austin, and I went in search of him. I found him in a hospital of the Sisters of Charity, sick and dying. As he believed himself to be on his death-bed, he told me all he knew about Nevins and the gold and the girl

"He had become acquainted with Nevins while the latter was looking for land, and had persuaded him to go further into the interior, to trade with the Indians. They took the girl with them, and the gold, and a stock of goods that belonged to Landsden. They might have made a fortune, Landsden said; but the Indians became hostile, and annoyed them so much, that they were obliged to make a moonlight flitting, in order to save their lives. What is the matter now, colonel? Was not that an alarm?"

One of the sentinels announced that somebody was approaching the camp, and all were aroused and excited in a moment; but the "somebody" proved to be nothing but a prairie-wolf, and the excitement was succeeded by disappointment.

"I hoped it might be Tom," said Colonel Worsham. "He stays out very late to-night, and I must read him a lecture upon his carelessness. Go on with your story, Charley. It is becoming very interesting, and we will listen to it while we are waiting for Tom."

CHAPTER V.

THE LOST HUNTER.

"As I was telling you," said Archer, "Nevins and his friend were obliged, by fear of the Indians, to get away from the hills in a hurry. Before they left, Nevins buried his money, after taking out about a thousand dollars, intending to return at his leisure and get the rest.

"And here comes in the strangest item in the affair. Nevins had been drinking quite heavily when he buried the money, and his head, to use a Texas phrase, wasn't exactly level. He buried it without a witness, in some very secret place, and carefully obliterated all traces of his work.

"Afterward, when he went to look for the money, accompanied by Landsden, he had lost all remembrance of the place where it was buried. He searched for it in vain, and in vain cudgelled his brain to recollect where he had hid it; but he

was no nearer finding it than he would have been if he had deposited it in the moon, and he abandoned the search in despair.

“That night he had a dream, in which a spirit appeared to him, he said, and told him that if he would be there at every third new moon, he would finally be shown the spot where the treasure was buried. As he was a strong believer in dreams, he resolved to follow the directions of the spirit, which was probably the spirit of alcohol.”

“During two years, as Landsden told me, he went there every three months, but invariably returned without the treasure. As the vision appeared to him on two successive occasions, he was not discouraged, and determined to continue his visits until the hiding-place should be disclosed to him. After that, Landsden lost sight of him, and has never seen him again.”

“All this brings us no nearer to little May,” interrupted Mrs. Worsham. “If we can not find her, it is of little consequence what else we find.”

“When we find her, if we ever do, she will no longer be little May. If we are to find her, we must find Nevins. As he goes every three months—though that, I confess, is mere supposition—to search for his hid treasure, he must be looked for at the right time and place.

“I got from Landsden, as near as he could tell it, the time of the year at which Nevins made one of his trips, and brought the calculation, as well as I could, down to the present time. He also gave me a description of the place where the money was buried, and told me the route, rather vaguely and unsatisfactorily, that I was to take to reach it. I went there, as directly and surely as if I had always known the way. I left Tophet and Wolf there to watch, and Wolf is to bring me the news if any thing happens.”

“Do you believe that that dog will be able to find you?” asked Mrs. Worsham.

“I have no doubt of it. It seems to me that my steps have been guided by Providence thus far, and I can not believe that nothing will come of the discoveries I have made. Nevins may have found his gold and carried it away, or he may be dead; but I believe, against all chances, that he must be

looked for at the right time and place. I can think of no other means by which May can be found, unless——”

“Unless what?” eagerly asked Mrs. Worsham.

“Unless; but I warn you that this is one of my foolish fancies, and you must pay no attention to it. I stopped one night at a miserable cross-roads tavern, not far from Vallecito, the ranch that the Colonel has purchased. There I saw a girl to whom my attention was strongly attracted. Her form and face were such as I would suppose May’s might be by this time, and I could not believe that she belonged to the people with whom she lived. She interested me so much, that I determined to return to that tavern, some time, and endeavor to learn more about her.”

“I can build nothing on such a foundation as that, Charley.”

“I don’t wish you to. I warned you that it was only a freak of my imagination. Always, when I see people who are out of their place, I build up a mystery and weave a story concerning them. With regard to that girl, I was simply fancying what might be. But I have talked myself tired, and must get some sleep. Little Em looks weary and sad and almost broken-hearted. Has Tom ever staid out as late as this?”

“Not quite so late. I am getting uneasy about him. Go and lie down, Charley, and I will wait for him.”

When Charley Archer rolled out of his blanket in the morning, the first thing that met his eyes was the figure of Emma Langley, who was standing near him, with an anxious, expectant look on her face, as if she had been waiting for him to awake.

In an instant he was on his feet, and wished her good-morning.

What is the matter, little Em?” he asked. “Hasn’t Tom come back yet?”

“No, no, no,” she moaned. “What can have become of him?”

“I won’t disguise it from you, Emma, that this seems to me to be a serious matter. He has lost his way on the prairie, or the Indians have got him. But don’t be troubled so much about it, Emma. There is hope enough yet. I will

mount my horse and go to search for him right away. I promise you that I will do my best to find him, and will bring him back if it is possible to do so."

"You must not go alone," said Colonel Worsham, when Archer had signified his intention of searching for the lost hunter. "We will make up a party, and you shall lead it."

Archer protested that he had rather go alone, that he could do much better alone, that a party would only attract the attention of the Indians, and bring on a difficulty that might otherwise be avoided; but Colonel Worsham was importunate, and he consented to take a companion.

"I will take Sim Wilkins," he said. "He can hold his tongue, and will do as I tell him."

Sim Wilkins was a wiry little man, noted for his taciturnity and for his skill with a rifle. He and Archer were soon ready, and the hopes and fears of all followed them when they set out.

As they left the camp, Archer advised Colonel Worsham to continue his journey, saying that he and Wilkins would overtake the train at the night camp; but the colonel declared that he would not move until he should obtain tidings of his son, and the two searchers rode away.

They rode back on the trail a distance of several miles, and then struck off toward the north, in the direction that Tom Worsham was supposed to have taken. As they rode, they noticed the ground carefully, hoping to find some trace of the lost hunter, and their search was rewarded, after they had traveled several miles, by the discovery of the fresh trail of a shod horse.

Knowing that they were on the right track, they followed it carefully, Archer keeping his eyes on the trail, and his companion looking out over the prairie. They soon reached a place where the young man had killed a deer, which he had disemboweled and thrown upon his horse. This much was plain, as the entrails were still on the ground, and the deer had undoubtedly been killed during the previous day.

"He has started from here to return to the train," said Archer. "The deer was load enough for the horse, and he

has not hunted any more. If he has taken the right direction, we may know that he has not lost his way."

It was as Archer said. The hunter had turned, at the place where the deer was killed, and had gone toward the west, in a direction nearly paralld with the route of the train. After a while the trail bent toward the south, showing that Tom knew what he was about, and that he had not lost his way.

"You see how it is now," said Archer, as he stopped his horse, and looked in all directions over the prairie. "Tom has not lost his way. He has taken exactly the right course, and has traveled slowly, believing that he would have plenty of time to reach the train before night. Indians have been hovering on the track of the wagons, probably for many days, waiting an opportunity to snap him up, and they have got him at last. What do you think about it, Sim?"

"That's where it is," replied the taciturn Wilkins.

The searchers then proceeded more slowly, examining the trail with the greatest care, and keeping a sharp look-out on all sides, until they came near a motte, or small clump of timber, close to which the trail evidently ran.

Archer dismounted, and went forward to examine the motte, leaving his horse in charge of his companion, who was also to cover him with his rifle.

He approached the motte cautiously, and entered it after a careful reconnoissance. In a few moments he came out, and signaled to Wilkins, who rode up to the motte.

Within a few steps of the timber was a dead horse, with an arrow buried nearly to the tip in his body. There was no blood near the spot, except that of the horse, and there was very slight evidence, if any, of a struggle. There were, however, the tracks of ten or a dozen horses, that had gone toward the north-west.

"The red-skins saw him coming, and they waited for him in the timber," said Archer. "They rushed on him when his horse fell, and secured him without any difficulty. They carried him away alive, and he may still be living."

Sim Wilkins "allowed" that that was "the way of it," and they went off on the trail of the Indians at a gallop, as it was easy enough to follow.

Before leaving the motte, they took the bearings of the camp, and estimated their distance from it, the opinions of the two men on these points agreeing very closely. As they followed the trail, they slackened their speed whenever they came to a bunch of timber or any considerable rise of ground, and reconnoitered it well before venturing in or upon it.

It was near nightfall when they came in sight of the heavy timber that lined the banks of a stream flowing toward the south-east. An unmistakable smoke, rising above the tops of the trees, and outlined against the red of the sunset, convinced them that the Indians whom they were pursuing were camped near the stream.

They entered the timber at a considerable distance below the smoke, dismounted, and tethered their horses. Archer proposed to go and examine the Indian camp, for the purpose of ascertaining whether Tom Worsham was to be found there; but Sim Wilkins was so anxious to undertake the task, that his companion consented that he should do so, as his light weight and cautious character peculiarly fitted him for such employment.

He succeeded so well, that he returned within half an hour, and reported a war-party of fifty or more Comanches, who were camped near the stream, with Tom Worsham tied to a tree in the midst of them.

Archer then directed his companion to ride to the camp and report what he had seen. He was also to request Colonel Worsham to make no movement, but to rely upon Archer for the release of the prisoner.

Wilkins made some slight objections to this plan, which were easily overruled by Archer, and he rode away in the supposed direction of the camp.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIRE-EATER.

When Sim Wilkins had gone, Archer produced from the inside pockets of his coat a small mirror and some red and blue pigments, and proceeded to paint his face, by the fast-failing light of day, after a fashion that was very grotesque, though not highly ornamental.

Having streaked and splotted his countenance to his satisfaction, he mounted, and rode up the stream.

When he had come in sight of the Comanche camp, he put spurs to his horse, and galloped as fast as the heavy timber would allow, yelling, waving his hands, and tossing up his rifle, after the manner of the Indians when they make a friendly visit.

The Comanches, perceiving him, started up and seized their arms, to give him such a reception as the nature of his visit might deserve ; but they did not offer him any injury, as he was only one man and at their mercy.

He rode at full speed right up to the fire, where he halted so suddenly that he pulled his horse back upon his haunches, leaped to the ground, and commenced an animated harangue in High Dutch.

The Indians, stolid as they usually were, could not conceal their surprise at the spectacle of this strangely-painted white man, who had come among them so boldly, and who was addressing them in the most extravagant manner, and with the wildest gestures, in a language that none of them could pretend to understand.

When he had finished his speech, which he closed with an overwhelming flourish of gibberish, they spoke to him in their own language and in Spanish and English ; but Archer stood with his eyes and mouth wide open, shaking his head sadly, as if he found it impossible to understand them.

As soon as they attempted to communicate with him by

means of signs, he commenced another wild and furious harangue, in the course of which he edged nearer to Tom Worsham, and put into his speech the following words in French, for the benefit of Tom, who was well acquainted with that language :

“ Listen to me, Tom, and give no sign to show that you know me. You will probably get loose from here to-night or in the morning. Take my horse, or any other that is handy, and ride due south-east, and you will come to the wagons or their trail. Tell your father to feel no uneasiness on my account, as I am in no danger, and I will join him when I get ready to-do so.”

Having accomplished his first object, which was to warn Tom Worsham of what he might expect, Archer brought his oration to a close with another grand flourish, pointing to the fire at which the Indians' meat was cooking, and then to his throat.

The Indians, supposing from this pantomime that he was hungry and asking for food, led him to the fire, and offered him a piece of meat that was toasting on a forked stick. Archer smelled of it, shook his head, and laid it back on the coals. He then took from his pocket a small tin box, from which he poured into the palm of his left hand a little semi-liquid paste, and rubbed his hands together as if in the act of washing them. At the same time he prostrated himself before the fire, held up his hands toward it, and went through with various contortions and genuflexions, accompanied by a quantity of uncouth and muttered gibberish.

The Comanches, who were not ignorant of those tribes who still worshiped the sun, and fire as the sun's representative, and among whom some remnants of the fire-worshiping tradition still existed, watched his proceedings with interest, doubtless believing that he was performing incantations before his deity.

Having finished his mummary, Archer beckoned to the Indians, and pointed at the meat, as if he wished them to eat their suppers.

This being the very thing they were desirous of doing, and which they had been ready to do when he interrupted them,

they were willing enough to seat themselves on the ground and begin their repast.

Again they offered him a piece of meat, which he again refused, and, after calling their attention to what he was about to do, thrust his right hand into the fire, and drew out a live coal, which he deliberately placed in his mouth, chewing and swallowing it with great gusto. Another and another followed, while the Comanches discontinued their own eating, to gaze in blank amazement at this singular repast.

Archer continued his fire-eating performance a few moments, and then, rising to his feet, slapped his stomach as if he was satisfied. After this he washed his hands in the fire, and then seated himself on the ground, where he remained quiet while the Comanches finished their meal.

The Indians ate in silence, as was their custom, their mouths being so fully occupied in bolting or masticating vast quantities of meat, that they were not available for purposes of speech.

When they had fully gorged themselves, a pipe was lighted and passed around, Archer taking a whiff in his turn, and then they ventured to talk.

Their talk was, at first, of the queer white man who had come among them so strangely, and Archer, who was partially acquainted with the dialect they used, gathered from their conversation that they were divided in opinion concerning him. Some believed him to be insane, and therefore an object of pity and care; others, that he was one of the fire-worshiping white Indians who lived many a day's journey toward the west; others, that he was a sort of fire king, whose friendship it would be well to conciliate, and whose anger it would be dangerous to arouse. All agreed that he was a wonderful medicine, and the name which they gave him—the Fire-eater—accorded with the most salient characteristic that had struck their attention.

They next spoke of Tom Worshen, who had been fed and again bound to his tree, and the conclusion arrived at with regard to him was, that they would send him away in the morning, with a guard, to the temporary town where they had left their women and children and the main body of the tribe, and that they would hover about the trail of Colonel

Worsham's train, in the hope of picking up scalps and plunder.

Archer understood Indian nature well enough to know that he must keep up his character, and must not suffer the interest in his performances to decline. He rose to his feet, therefore, and treated his audience to another brief oration in High Dutch. He then deliberately plucked a knife from the belt of an Indian who stood near him.

The Comanche, indignant at the appropriation was about to lay violent hands upon the thief, when Archer, holding up the knife at arm's length, and raising his head, dropped it into his mouth, and swallowed it with an expression of great relish.

At this astounding performance, the Indians started back in amazement, and did not attempt to restrain their expressions of wonder. Some of them persisted in opening the mouth of Fire-eater, and in looking down his throat; but they failed to find any vestige of the knife. Others punched him in the ribs and the stomach, until he doubled up, as if in pain, put both his hands upon his cheeks, and the knife flew out of his mouth as if it had been shot out. It was picked up by its owner, and was examined by him and the other Comanches, who felt its edge and tried the metal, until they were fully convinced that its substance had not been altered.

Archer then evinced a desire to attend to his horse, which, as he assured his auditors by means of signs, was a most wonderful animal. Having succeeded in making himself understood, he led the horse to the stream, and watered him.

In going to the water, and in coming from it, he passed the tree to which the prisoner was bound, and, in so doing, brought his sleight-of-hand into requisition again. As he went, he cut the cord by which Tom Worsham was tied to the tree. As he returned, he cut the cord that fastened the prisoner's hands, and whispered a word of caution in his ear. Instead of taking his horse back to the fire, or tethering him with the horses of the Comanches, he slipped the bridle over the limb of a tree, within a few yards of the prisoner.

Hardly had he returned to the fire, and seated himself on the ground, when the bleating of a doe was heard in the timber near by. As the Indians seized their guns and listened, the sound was repeated, and was followed by the gobbling of a turkey.

When the Indians, excited by these noises, unusual at that hour, and so close to their camp, had their attention turned from the prisoner at the tree, he threw aside his bonds, quietly stepped to Archer's horse, loosed the bridle from the limb, and sprung upon his back.

The doe bleated again, and Archer chuckled, dropping his head upon his breast.

The Comanches were recalled to their duty by the galloping of the horse, as Tom Worsham dashed through the timber toward the open prairie. Several of them leveled their guns, and were about to fire at the fugitive, when a voice in their own language, that seemed to proceed from the lips of their chief, ordered them to let him alone.

The chief seized a gun, and fired it hastily, angrily asking the warriors why they had not shot down the prisoner.

"Why did you order us not to fire?" they demanded, quite as angrily as he had spoken.

When the chief denied that he had given them such an order or any other order, the Fire-eater chuckled again.

They hastened to mount their horses and to pursue the escaped prisoner; but the time for arresting his flight had gone by. He had a good start, and was mounted upon a horse that was much swifter than any of theirs.

A few chosen braves started in pursuit, mounted upon the best horses the band possessed, and rode off into the darkness; but they soon returned, reporting the fugitive so far ahead that they had entirely lost sight of him.

When inquiry was made for the Fire-eater, he was found lying on the ground by the fire, wrapped in a blanket, and sleeping as calmly as if he knew himself to be in the midst of friends.

In the morning Archer judged by the conversation of the Indians, and by the significant manner in which they looked at him, that they suspected him of having been in some manner connected with the escape of the preceding night.

He knew that his position among them was as yet very precarious, and felt the necessity of making an effort to avert their suspicions, and to obtain another hold upon their credulity, if not upon their sympathy.

He went to the limb at which he had hitched his horse, and pretended to have just discovered the disappearance of the animal. He ran frantically about the camp, bewailing his loss in High Dutch, and in pantomime asking the warriors what had become of his horse.

They explained to him, by means of the language of signs, in which all the Indians of the plains are so perfect, that the prisoner had escaped, and had ridden away on the horse of Fire-eater.

When this was fully understood by Archer, he went to the tree to which Tom Worsham had been bound, picked up the cut thongs, examined and turned them over with the curiosity of a child, laughed immoderately, and wound up the performance by throwing them down his throat and swallowing them. He then hastened to the chief, whom he gave to understand that he was very angry concerning the loss of his horse, and that another must be procured for him without any delay.

When the chief shook his head, to negative this impudent demand, Archer pointed at the sun, and threatened him with the anger of that luminary.

The chief smiled incredulously, and Archer took a burning-glass from his pocket, and held it up toward the sun. Then, seizing the chief's hand, he held the glass near to it, and brought the rays to a focus upon the brown skin.

The chief watched the bright spot on his hand with considerable curiosity, until the point of heat began to burn and blister the skin, when he snatched the hand away, with an exclamation of pain and surprise.

As Archer again pointed to the sun, and reiterated his demand in pantomime, the chief led the way to the horses, and, selecting one of the best, gave its lariat into the hand of the Fire-eater, intimating that the horse was to be his.

The Indians soon broke camp and rode away, and Archer accompanied them, mounted on his new horse.

CHAPTER VII.

OUT OF THE SNARE.

NELL DARE stood in the shanty kitchen of Bill Dare's shanty tavern, near an open window that was destitute of glass. She was engaged in the unromantic occupation of washing some miserable dishes, most of which were of tin, and pewter, and iron. But she dignified this occupation, as she dignified every thing with which she came in contact. An expression that was a faint imitation of nobility came upon the rough features of burly and red-nosed Bill Dare when Nelly was near him, and even his squab-faced, intensely ugly squaw caught a gleam of intelligence and a shadowy beauty from the radiance that Nelly diffused about her.

Nell Dare was washing dishes; but the expression of her large, dark eyes, as she looked out upon the rolling prairie and the distant timber, showed that her thoughts were not among the pots and pans.

She was thinking, as she had thought again and again, of the cheery, bright-eyed, handsome stranger, who had stopped at the tavern one night, with a big negro and a big dog, and who had beguiled the rough crowd in the bar-room by marvelous feats of sleight-of hand and ventriloquism.

So different was that stranger from any she had seen in that wild region, that his image was photographed on her memory, and she had invested him with an atmosphere of romance that was not borrowed from books, but had sprung up spontaneously in her own mind.

He had spoken to her kindly; he had shown that he felt an interest in her; he had offered to assist her. More than that, there had been looks and tones of his, which her nature could interpret as well as an educated intelligence, and which spoke of the possibility of a deeper feeling than mere interest.

As she thought of those looks and tones, a shade of melancholy overspread her face and gathered in her eyes, and

she knew that the handsome stranger had left cords behind him that drew her toward him in spite of herself.

Yes; in spite of herself. She felt that he could be nothing to her, and that she ought to forget him; but her day-dreams were many, and his image would intrude in every one of them.

He had warned her of trouble that was in store for her, and had advised her to leave that place and to fly with him. She could not have done *that*. She did not profess to love Bill Dare or the squab-faced squaw; but she thought that she ought not to leave them, unless such a step should be absolutely necessary for her safety or liberty. Especially it would not have been right to go in the company of that young and handsome stranger, however much she might feel disposed to **trust him and believe in him.**

The trouble of which he had warned her was near at hand. There were several indications that told her of its approach. Her father had informed her that he was about to make a journey into the upper country, and had told her that he wished her to ride over to Vallecito the next morning. It was eight miles to Vallecito, and Rafe Stinson would have an excellent opportunity, if she should ride there alone, to pick **her up on the way.**

She believed that he meant to take advantage of that opportunity, and that her trip to Vallecito had been arranged for that purpose. Stinson had ceased to importune her, and there had been an entire change in his demeanor. He looked at her, now, as if he regarded her as his property, and believed it useless to attempt to win what he meant to take.

Bill Dare had also changed toward her. He avoided her, cast down his eyes before her look, spoke fawningly and cringingly when he was obliged to speak to her, and had a general appearance of being guilty of some secret meanness, an aspect not unlike that of a dog that has been sucking eggs.

The squab-faced squaw, who hated Nelly most sincerely, did not attempt to conceal her delight at the prospect of humbling the object of her hatred, if not of getting rid of her entirely. She chuckled audibly when Nelly's back was turned, and her demeanor was that of an inferior who believed herself about to gain an advantage over a superior.

These indications led Nelly to believe that the proposed trip to Vallecito was to be used for the purpose of delivering her into the power of Rafe Stinson, and she was determined to foil the plotters, let the cost to herself be what it might.

She might start to Vallecito, and continue her journey by another road, losing sight forever of Bill Dare and his shanty tavern, and upon that point she had fully made up her mind. But, whither should she go, and what would become of her? Burnham and his people, at the Vallecito ranch, could not protect her if they would, against Stinson and his band of outlaws. There was no hiding-place to which they could not track her, and it was probable that they would soon overtake her, whichever route she might choose.

Nevertheless, she was determined to make the effort. Almost any fate would be preferable to a union with Stinson.

Then she thought of Rube Warnick. It was not the first time she had thought of him; but now he came into her mind as a tower of strength, a protector and a guide.

Charley Archer had told her that she might depend upon this man and trust in him, and Charley Archer could say nothing that she would not believe.

Rube Warnick was a man of middle age, tall, broad shouldered and angular, rough enough in appearance, but with a natural gentleness of voice and manner toward her. He wore the long hair and heavy beard peculiar to hunters and trappers, and his garb was such as usually distinguished these half-wild denizens of the plains and mountains. He had made his appearance in that vicinity a day or two before Charley Archer came to the tavern, and was not, as far as could be seen, in any way connected with that young man. After Archer went northward, Rube Warnick had remained in the neighborhood, frequently showing himself at the tavern, where he drank brandy from El Paso and whisky from the States, without losing his balance, or involving himself in a difficulty with any of the rough crowd that constituted the greater portion of Bill Dare's customers. He paid his way, interfered with nobody, kept his business, if he had any, to himself, and generally "filled the bill" of a wandering trap

per who is willing to settle down and enjoy rest and quiet for a while, instead of spending his hard-earned gains in one wild whirl of gambling and debauchery.

Nell Dare saw him approaching the tavern, and went to meet him, to learn what virtue there might be in the words that Archer had bade her speak to him.

It happened that he came in before her father entered the bar-room, and she stepped close to him, so that she could speak in a low tone.

"I have heard from Charley."

Warnick started slightly, and his eyes twinkled as he answered.

"I am glad to hear that, sure, and you may be sartin that I am all right. Any thin' up?"

"I must ride to Vallecito in the morning."

"I shell hev to go that way, myself, and will be apt to start earlier'n you will; but it's likely I may meet you. 'Tain't a big journey over thar; but you mought as well take along some sort of a bundle or suthin'."

Bill Dare came in, and the hunter seated himself, and called for something to drink; while Nelly stood at the door, looking out on the prairie. She felt that she had a friend in Rube Warnick, a friend who would guide and protect her to the best of his ability, and in whose kindness and truth she could place implicit confidence.

In the morning she was cheerful enough, and ready to ride to Vallecito. Bill Dare saddled her horse, while the squab-faced squaw chuckled and grinned, and Nelly smiled upon them both as she took her seat in the saddle.

"Good-by, father," she said, a little mournfully, as she held out her hand to the old man.

"Why, you ain't goin' more'n a thousand miles, I reckon," he answered. "Hardly worth while to say good-by for that. Be sure to hurry back, Nell."

The girl rode away in silence, leaving him staring after her and muttering to himself.

She came to the long prairie, where the road forked, where Archer had gone to the right, avoiding the trap that had been laid for him at the other end of the prairie. Here she stopped, to summon up her failing resolution, wondering

what had become of Rube Warnick, wondering whether he had rightly understood her, and in what manner he meant to assist her.

Soon she saw him coming toward her, under the tall trees that lined the creek, and she rode forward to meet him.

"We kain't stop to talk, Miss," he said, as she halted for the purpose of entering into an explanation with him. "It's my idee that we had better be movin' on to'able sharp, and we kin talk as we ride."

Nelly ranged up by his side, and pushed her horse to a trot.

"You hev heerd from Charley," he continued, "and that's enough fur me. In p'int of fact, that's what I'm here fur, 'mong other things. You want help of some sort, and I guess what it is, I reckon; but you may tell me all about it, ef you want to."

Nelly repeated to her guide what Archer had told her concerning the agreement between Bill Dare and Stinson, by which the latter, with the consent of the former, was to take forcible possession of her, and declared her belief that the plot was to be carried into effect that morning, by her capture on the road to Vallecito.

"Jest so," said the trapper, when she had finished. "I 'lowed the float stick was p'intin' that way. And so that cussed rat of a Rafe Stinson is the one who is arter you! I hev give that crittur 'bout rope enough, I reckon, and I must haul him up with a round turn purty soon, and make him pay for the new and the old."

"What is the matter?" asked Nelly. "Has he ever done you any harm?"

"Reckon he has. I kim down to Bent's, long ago, with some eight thousand dollars, all I'd saved outen many years hard work, and I meant to leave liquor alone, and leave keards alone, and marry a 'coman that had agreed to take me, and settle down like a white man. But that Rafe Stinson got me to drinkin', and p'isoned my liquor, and cleaned me outen my hull pile, so's I had to ax credit fur some traps, and go back into the mountings. He's forgot me; but I remember *him*, and I'm dead sure to git even with him, afore

I quit. I wouldn't be a bit surprised—supposin' Charley's notions to be true—ef it's suthin' besides you that the cuss wants—ef he ain't thinkin' of ketchin' a gray fox, 'stead of a 'gopher.'"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Don't rightly know, myself. Charley knows more'n I do 'bout it, and he's got his own notions. Ef thar's any thin' in it, you'll know it afore long."

"Who is Charley? and who are you? and what are you both doing in this country?"

"Charley Archer, Miss, is as white a man as ever lived on *this* airth. I hain't known him long; but I know that much for sartin. As fur me, I'm on'y a rough sort of a poor cuss, good fur nothin' except with a rifle or a trap, or on a trail. Charley kin across me down Austin way, and hired me to go with him, though I would hev gone without any pay. He left me here to look arter things—the Vallecito ranch, yander, and the the tavern—and I was on hand, you see, when you said that you had heard from Charley."

"Do you mean to take care of me? What will we do? Where will we go to?"

"I reckon that will come out all right, Miss, ef Stinson and his men don't ketch us afore night comes, and we must look out fur that. When we git to the hills, we kin hide thar, until we hear suthin' of Charley or the train he is lookin' fur. But we had better be gittin' on a leetle faster. Stinson will wait fur you at the pass, and will be mad as thunder when you don't come, and then he will go to hunt you up, and will find the trail, and will start out on it hot and heavy."

CHAPTER VIII.

FOR BEAUTY AND BOOTY.

WARNICK was correct in his surmises concerning the probable action of Rafe Stinson. That individual, with two men who were well suited to his purpose, went to the pass at the head of the long prairie, at an early hour in the morning, that he might be sure to be there in time to intercept Nell Dare as she rode on to Vallecito.

As Nelly had supposed, this proceeding was in accordance with an arrangement between Stinson and Bill Dare, and the latter had started the girl from the tavern at an hour that had been agreed upon.

Stinson knew, therefore, at what time he might expect her, and was ready to receive her; but she did not come. Impatient at her delay, he sent one of his men out of the timber as a scout, to ascertain what had become of her; but, though a long stretch of prairie was visible, she was nowhere to be seen.

He could only conclude that she had not left the tavern, or that something had occurred to prevent her from crossing the prairie, and he was angry enough, deeming it probable that Bill Dare had repented of his determination, and had changed his mind at the last moment.

Stinson had no idea of being baffled in this way. He had set his mind upon gaining possession of Nelly, and was resolved to have her. He mounted, therefore, with his men and rode at full speed toward the tavern, with the intention of visiting his wrath upon Bill Dare, and of compelling the old man to account for the failure of the girl to be at the appointed place at the appointed time.

When he arrived at the tavern, he found Dare's horse hitched in front of the door, bridled and saddled; but Dare was not visible. Inquiring for him, Stinson was informed by the squab-faced squaw that he was preparing for a journey.

"Send him here, quicker than greased lightnin'!" exclaimed Stinson, "or I will haul him out in a way he won't like."

Dare quickly made his appearance, with his "buck-skins" on, and stared with eyes and mouth wide open at Stinson, asking him what was the matter, and what had brought him there.

"You know well enough, you red-eyed old reprobate," replied Stinson. "You have gone back on me—that's what's the matter. You always thought that your girl was too good for me, and you have broken your agreement, or have lied to me from the beginning. You had better own up, now, and save trouble."

"Own up!" exclaimed Dare, still staring wildly. "What on aith do you mean? Wasn't the gal thar? Haven't you met her?"

"She was not there; I have not met her; she has not gone toward Vallecito this morning. I am not to be trifled with in this way, Bill Dare. What has become of Nelly?"

"The sun wasn't an hour high, Rafe Stinson, when she left here, and she has had time enough to go to Vallecito and back. That's a fact—sure as salvation. The old woman, here, saw her ride off, and she went straight up into the peraira."

The squab-faced squaw, being called upon, corroborated Bill Dare's statements, which he repeated, with the most solemn asservations of their truth.

"And where are *you* going to?" asked Stinson, who was still inclined to believe that he had been tricked.

"I'm goin' up country, on some private business of my own."

"You are going with us, old sinner. You are going to help us hunt that girl, and she must be found, or there will be trouble in the camp. No use talking, Bill Dare. We are too many for you. You have got to go with us, and the sooner you start the better."

Dare was not fond of doing any thing upon compulsion. He was no coward, and at another time might have resisted this aggression upon his right of free locomotion; but the disappearance of Nelly—if she really had disappeared—puz-

zled him greatly, and he was as anxious to discover her as Stinson was. Besides, if she had run away, she had probably taken the very route that he intended to pursue in his journey toward the north.

"Big words don't count with me, Rafe Stinson," he said; "but I'll go and look for my gal, if she is really lost, or has run away."

As he was already armed and accoutered for his journey, he was soon prepared to start, and mounted and rode away with Stinson and his men.

"Do you think she could have got any hint of what was goin' to be done?" he asked, as he turned his horse's head toward the north.

"She got none from me," surlily answered Stinson.

"You needn't be so durned crusty about it. If she got any hint, it wasn't from me. But she has suspicioned somethin', and has put out, or somebody else has picked her up. Now I think of it, she had a mighty queer way of sayin' goo-bye to me this mornin', when she started. There go her tracks. You can see 'em plain enough. Her hoss had shoes on his fore-feet."

At the fork of the roads the party stopped, and it could easily be seen that the shod horse had taken the route that led up the creek.

"Here's the p'int of the business," said Bill Dare. "She has had no idea of goin' to Vallecito. Somethin' has turned her fur up the wrong way—that is sartin—and she has lit out on her own hook. If she has gone off alone, it can't be long afore we will come up with her."

"I wonder if she *has* gone off alone," said Stinson, looking suspiciously at the tracks. "She has stopped here, as if doubting what to do. It is likely that somebody put her up to this move, and that she had a friend somewhere about here. Suppose we look a little further."

They went on, and found the tracks of another horse, that had joined Nelly's horse, and the two had gone up the creek road together.

"That settles the matter," said Stinson. "I only wish I knew who it is that has gone off with her. It can't be possible that that young fellow has come back this way—the one

who escaped us so strangely a while ago. The girl looked at him, then, as if she had an understanding with him."

"That is all nonsense," remarked Dare.

"Don't bet too high on that, old man. Who is that Rubo Warnick who has been about here lately? I don't know any good of him."

"I don't know any harm of him. He is a quiet sort of a chap."

"Your quiet chaps are the very men I don't like. They are always apt to be plotting something. That man's face seems familiar to me, somehow; but I can't place him. Has he been at your place lately?"

"He was there last night, and left at daybreak this morning. I hope you don't suspect that the gal has gone off with him."

"She has gone off with somebody, and it is as likely to be with him as anybody else. There's no other man about here whom we don't know. But we won't gain any thing by talking about it. All we've got to do is to follow them up and settle the matter with them. They can't get away from us. Come on, old man."

"I want to talk to you a few minutes in private," said Dare. "I've got somethin' particular to tell you."

"What's the matter now? It looks as if you want to hold me back from this chase."

"That ain't the idee, though. If we can kill two birds with one stone, I reckon that will be a payin' business."

Stinson turned his horse aside into the timber, to listen to what his companion had to say.

"I don't want those chaps to hear it," said Dare. "This business has got money in it—lots of money."

"Out with it, then, and be quick."

"You know that Colonel Worsham, from Louisiann, has bought the Vallecito ranch, and is on his way to take possession of it. I know the route by which he is comin', and I know where to head him off and take his train."

"And you want me to help you do it, I suppose. What do you expect to gain by it?"

"Money."

"What else?"

"Revenge!"

"I thought you had enough revenge. You needn't tell me the story. I can tell it quicker than you can. Colonel Worsham was a rich planter, and you were his overseer. You were caught stealing from him, and he had you whipped by the niggers. Then you begged him to take you back, promising to do better. He took you back, and you waited for your revenge until you got it. You ran away, carrying off a large sum of money, and his daughter, a girl four or five years old. **Nell Dare is his daughter.**"

"How did you know that?" asked Dare, in utter amazement.

"Part of it I heard, and part I guessed. I heard the story of Worsham's overseer; I knew that your name was once Nevins; it was easy enough to guess that the girl was none of yours. I want her because she is his daughter, as well as for herself. It has been my ambition to marry a rich man's daughter. But you had your revenge. Was it not enough, to take his money and his child?"

"No. I have lost the money, and now the girl is gone. She may come across her own people before we can catch her, and who can say how many chances there will be in her favor then? If we take fifty men, we can clean out Worsham's folks, and make a sure thing of the train. Then you can make terms with him for yourself, and I will settle with him for myself."

"Why not wait until he comes down and takes possession of the ranch?"

"He is to bring the money for Vallecito, and we would have no chance at it after Burnham gets hold of it. Besides, we may have to take the train to get the gal."

"Very well. I will send Curly Potter back to get the boys together and bring them on after us. It is not worth while to wait for them; and we had better push on after the girl as fast as we can."

Stinson gave some instructions to one of the men who accompanied him, and he rode toward the south; while the other, with Stinson and Dare, followed the trail that led up the creek road.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PURSUERS BAFFLED.

"THAR'S the hills, Miss," said Rube Warnick, pointing to a mountain, whose rugged summit the rays of the declining sun were tinging with a golden glory.

"Is it so far off yet?" replied Nell Dare, with something like a sigh.

"Hope you ain't tired, Miss?"

"Not very, though my horse is, I know. But I thought we would have reached the hills long before now. We seemed to be nearly there, hours ago."

"Looks is powerful deceivin' on these plains. We've got three or four miles to go yet, I reckon. The only wonder to me is, that we've come so far without bein' overhauled. It mought be that that cuss didn't mean to lay far you this mornin', and that they hain't no notion of gittin' on our trail."

"If I could only believe that they considered me not worth following, I should be very glad," said Nelly, with a sad smile. "I have not the least doubt that Rafe Stinson meant to capture me on the road to Vailecito; but I hope that they have concluded not to bother themselves about me."

"It was easy enough to foller our trail, ef they wanted to do it. When we git to the hills, without bein' seen by 'em, you may count yourself safe, I reckon. What are you lookin' at, Miss? Hope you don't see nothin' back thar."

"But I do," replied Nelly, who had reined in her horse on the rising ground, and was looking backward. "I see something away yonder on the plain, and it is moving."

Warnick looked back, and his face grew dark with displeasure.

"That suthin' is men, Miss Nelly," he said, "men on hosses. Thar's three of 'em. They're arter us, sure enough, and they've see'd us, jest as sartin. What we've got to

do now is to run fur it, and the faster we git along the better."

Nelly pushed her horse as well as she could; but he had lost a shoe during the day, and had been going lame ever since noon. His progress, therefore, was provokingly slow, and it was with a feeling of intense pain that she perceived that her pursuers were gaining on her. The three horsemen, who had at first appeared like mere specks on the prairie, grew larger and more distinct, until their forms and proportions were plainly visible.

But the hills were near at hand. Already the ground was broken and rocky, and trees and undergrowth were taking the place of prairie-grass and blossoms. One more brave push, and they would be beyond the reach of their pursuers' vision, and might choose their hiding-place among the recesses of the mountain.

As Nelly's horse was struggling up a rugged slope, he struck a sharp stone with his unshod foot, and fell. She pulled him to his feet; but he was dead lame, and could not move.

"We must leave him to Bill Dare or the crows," said Warnick, as he dismounted, and assisted his companion to alight. "Git up into my saddle, Miss Nelly, and follow me. We'll beat 'em yit, and give 'em two pints in the game."

Nelly mounted Warnick's horse, and followed her guide closely, as he led the way over the rough ground, through the straggling timber, and up the steep side of the mountain, until the way became so rocky and precipitous that it was impossible for the horse to climb further.

Warnick had gone forward as if acquainted with the locality, and as if he knew the very point for which he was aiming. He had been following a little stream that dashed down the mountain side, and had now come to a place where there was no getting any higher without hard climbing. Right in front of him was a step about eight feet high, over which the water fell in a miniature cascade.

He made Nelly dismount, and helped her up the step, and then he ascended it himself, holding in his hand a stout lariat, of which he had made a halter for the horse.

The animal seemed to understand what he was wanted to do, when Warnick spoke to him and encouraged him to come up, planting his feet in the crevices of the rock, and doing his best to climb. With a strong surge on the lariat by Warnick and Nelly, and with a determined effort on the part of the horse, he mounted the step, nearly knocking over his biped friends as he recovered his footing on the slippery rock.

Nelly found herself in a narrow ravine, or cañon, running back into the mountain with a gentle ascent. Warnick, having taken the horse to a secure position, led her to the top of the step, and, after cautioning her not to expose herself, pointed down, beyond the base of the hill.

She started back in terror.

Sunset had been succeeded by a brief twilight, and objects at a distance could still be perceived with tolerable distinctness.

Struggling over the broken ground, among the scattered trees, and forcing their horses to their utmost speed, were Bill Dare, Rafe Stinson and another. She could even recognize their features, and could hear the oaths and exclamations with which they urged their horses forward, anxious to overtake the fugitives before the trail should be hid by darkness.

"Let us hurry on," said Nelly, as she drew back into the shadow of the cañon. "They are so very near, and will be up here in a few minutes."

"No danger of that, I reckon," replied Warnick. "They ain't quite so near as you think they are, and they will soon lose the trail. We came up the brook, you know, and that leaves 'em no sign. If they follow the brook, they can only come to this place, and they'll be keen to swar that no hoss ever clumb up that chunk of rock. It will be dark right soon, and then they kain't do nothin' but camp."

In a few moments the curses of the pursuers proved that they were bewildered, and it was soon evident that they had abandoned the search for the trail. Warnick laughed, in his dry, chuckling way, and led Nelly up the gorge, driving his horse before him.

Just before night rendered the route quite impassable, they reached the head of the gorge—a little valley, as it appeared to be, in the midst of the hills. Grass for the horse and wood

for the fire were here, and Warnick, not having the fear of Bill Dare and Rafe Stinson before him, at once started a blaze. He spread out near the fire some meat and bread that he took from his "possible" sack, and invited Nelly to eat. She readily accepted the invitation, and both did justice to the rude repast.

Having removed the saddle and bridle from his horse, Warnick turned him loose, and gathered some pine branches and grass, with which he made a couch for Nelly, and spread his blanket upon it. He then replenished the fire, lighted his pipe, and told her that she might "turn in" whenever she should be pleased to do so.

It was not to be supposed that Nell Dare, having grown up among outlaws and the roughest class of borderers, in such an atmosphere as that in which Bill Dare would naturally move, should possess all the modesty and delicacy that distinguish her sex in civilized communities. She was modest and delicate enough, however, to appreciate the embarrassment of her position in being alone in the wilderness with a man who was comparatively a stranger to her. But she would have believed in Charley Archer, if he had been her protector, and she felt herself bound to believe in his friend. There was, too, an air of gentleness about Rube Warnick, with a rude sort of chivalry that would pass very well for politeness, and Nelly felt at least as well off as if she were at Dare's tavern, much better off than if in the power of Rafe Stinson.

So she laid down on her rude couch, trusting and tired, and slept soundly, while Rube Warnick smoked his pipe, and the horse refreshed himself with the rich mountain grass.

She was in the land of dreams, and Warnick, having finished his pipe, was nodding by the remains of the fire, with his back against a rock, when a dark object came down into the valley.

It was a four-footed object—a prowling stealthy object, that moved silently about the little camp, stopping every now and then, as if afraid of awaking the sleepers.

If the horse had noticed the prowler, he would have been frightened, and would have shown his alarm by some action that would have aroused his master; but he was absorbed in filling his interior with sweet grass, and he had no eyes or

ears for any events unconnected with that occupation. So that the four-footed object, having finished its survey of the surroundings, walked to Nell Dare, examined her with its fiery eyes, and then smelt her over, from the feet to the head.

She awoke in affright, and the hand that she involuntarily threw out struck against the hairy coat of the animal.

A scream of terror broke from her lips, and awakened Rube Warnick, who, catching a dim view of the prowler, shouted for the purpose of scaring it away. The shout was answered by a deep growl.

"A dorg, by thunder!" exclaimed Warnick, as he threw a handful of light wood on the embers.

The combustibles flamed up instantly, illuminating the camp with a ruddy glow, and showing the form of a tall and powerful dog, that stood sentry over Nelly, who had half risen, and was staring at the intruder with eyes full of fear and surprise.

"Don't be skeered, Miss," said the trapper, as he advanced toward the animal, that showed its teeth and growled menacingly. "I reckon he don't want to hurt anybody; but I'd like to know whar he kim from. Painters *and* rattlers! ef it ain't Charley Archer's dorg! Here, Wolf! Good feller! Come here, old boy!"

The "old boy" recognized Warnick at once, but thought best to show his teeth and growl a little more before responding to his advances. When he had satisfied himself with this exhibition, he condescended to wag his tail and to suffer the trapper to approach and pat him.

"This here, Miss, is Charley Archer's dorg," said Warnick. "Whar he kim from, how he got here, and what he's doin' here, is rayther more'n I know just now; but it stands to reason that his master ain't fur off, and we'll hunt him up in the mornin'."

Nelly's face flushed, and her heart beat rapidly. She was near him whose image had been present with her since she had first seen him. She would soon meet him, and he would be with her and protect her. There was such joy in the thought, that she inwardly blessed the dog that had brought the good news, and spoke to him and fondled him without fear.

The blandishments of Nelly and her guide were not sufficient to detain the dog beyond a few moments, and he ran off, up into the mountain.

"Ef it had been mornin', we'd hev follered him," said Warnick; "but he's too much fur us in the dark. Don't you be bothered, though, Miss. He has done his scoutin', and I reckon he has gone to tell his master about us."

So Nelly laid down upon her couch again, and surrendered herself to dreams of Charley Archer; while Rube Warnick, stretching himself on the ground near the fire, found the way to the Land of Nod.

Warnick was early awake, and had made a fire and nearly finished cooking some breakfast, before he aroused Nelly. She had just washed her face and hands in the clear little stream, when Wolf came bounding down into the valley, closely followed by an enormous negro, whose eyes shone, and whose ivories became visible, when he found himself in the presence of white people.

"Hullo, Toph!" exclaimed Warnick. "I'm powerful glad to see you. Whar did you come from, and whar's Charley?"

"Mighty glad to see you, too," replied the negro, whose joy for once overcame his taciturnity. "It's been supprisin' lonesome here, and the sight of white folks' faces is amazin' pleasant."

"Whar did you come from, and whar's Charley?"

"He luff me up yar to watch fur somebody, and somebody's come, and now I must send Wolf arter him."

"Do what?"

"Send Wolf, de dorg, arter Mass'r Charley."

"Whar is he?"

"Yar he is. Don't you see him?"

"I don't mean the dog. Whar's Charley?"

"Don't know. He's done gone somewhar—way off yander."

"Do you allow that that dorg kin find him?"

"Sartin."

"He's a smart dorg, then. Sit down here, ole dark, and eat suthin', and tell us all about yerself."

Tophet explained how and for what purpose Charley Archer had left him in the mountain, and Rube Warnick re-

lated how Nell Dare had fled with him from her father's tavern, and how they had ascended the mountain for the purpose of baffling their pursuers.

"I'll put that in," said Tophet. "That'll fetch him, sure."

He took a paper from his pocket, wrote a few words on it with a pencil, and inclosed it in a small oilcloth bag, which he tied carefully around Wolf's neck. He then spoke a few words to the dog, and pointed toward the east, and Wolf, with a farewell wag of his tail, set off at a trot.

Nelly watched the dog until he was out of sight, feeling that her fate might be depending on his intelligence and fidelity and speed.

CHAPTER X.

A RUNAWAY MEDICINE.

CHARLEY ARCHER did not find it quite such an easy matter to get away from the Comanches as he had expected it to be.

They had settled it in their minds that he was a Medicine-man of the first magnitude, and were determined to keep him. He was made unpleasantly aware of this fact by the closeness with which they watched all his movements, and by the limits which they set upon his perambulations, never allowing him to stray out of their sight, or to mount his horse except when they were all mounted.

As he was acknowledged and trusted as a Medicine-man, it was necessary to keep up the character, and it taxed his ingenuity pretty severely to support it. By dint of legerdemain and ventriloquism, together with some knowledge of the healing art that he had picked up among his other accomplishments, he retained the respect and confidence of the band.

He knew that he had but the choice of three things—to live as a Medicine-man, to be slain as an enemy, or to make his escape. As an attempt to escape, just then, would have been attended by too many risks, and as he was by no means

desirous of being put to death, he continued to act the *role* in which he had made his first appearance at the Comanche camp.

It was not really against his will that he remained with the red-men. As long as they hovered about Colonel Worsham's train, waiting for an opportunity to strike, he believed that he could be of more service to his friends in his present position than in any other. If the Comanches should determine to attack the train, he resolved that he would then slip off at all hazards, and give information of the danger.

His friends would be troubled about him, no doubt; but they ought to be well enough acquainted with him, he thought, to know that he was able to take care of himself, and felt sure that he was acting for their interest.

He was very anxious that Colonel Worsham should have a safe journey, and that he should speedily arrive at his destination, intending, as soon as the train should reach Vallecito, to look after the girl to whom his attention had been so strongly attracted at Dare's tavern. He had not forgotten her; on the contrary, she was continually in his thoughts and he hourly grew more impatient, longing for the time when he should again meet her. Those large dark eyes, and that wonderfully interesting countenance, with its gentle shade of melancholy, were objects that he could not have shut from his inner vision if he had wished to, and he did not wish to. There was, also, as he believed, a mystery about her that was to be cleared up, and she was invested, in his imaginative mind, with an atmosphere of romance that considerably enhanced the interest with which he regarded her.

These musings were interrupted one day, about noon, by the appearance of an immense staghound, that came near enough to the camp to be just within rifle range, and remained there, looking wistfully at the camp, but not venturing to approach any nearer.

The Indians, who had never seen any dogs but their own miserable curs, were divided in opinion as to what sort of an animal this might be, and it was proposed to shoot him, for the purpose of settling the question. But Archer, who had recognized Wolf, explained to them, by means of the uni-

versal sign language, that the animal was a great Medicine, and that it would be the luckiest thing that could possibly happen to the tribe, if it could be caught and tamed. He proposed, if the Indians would allow him to go to work in his own way, to tame the creature and bring it into the camp.

To this the Comanches gladly assented, and Archer, going a little nearer to the dog, went through with some mystical contortions, accompanied by a speech in High Dutch, addressed to the dog, who was sensibly sitting on his haunches, waiting for the signal that would allow him to approach his master.

"Come, Wolf!" said the young man, when he had made an end of his jabbering; and the dog rushed forward like a catapult, jumping upon him, and nearly knocking him down in its impetuous exhibition of affection. Archer took advantage of the opportunity, when Wolf was standing up, with his fore-paws on his master's breast, to remove a small packet that was tied about his neck, and to secretly thrust it into a pocket of his coat. He then walked proudly back to the camp, whither Wolf followed him "like a dog," to the great wonder and delight of the Indians.

Watching his chance when the eyes of the Comanches were not upon him, Archer opened the packet, and took therefrom a slip of paper, on which the following words were scrawled, in characters like those of a boy's first attempt at chirography:

"Man come and went away. No dig. Rube come with Dare's jal."

The note was brief enough, certainly, and not quite as satisfactory, perhaps, as it might have been made; but Archer was only puzzled by the reference to "Dare's jal." He concealed the note, and meditated upon the matter, until it flashed across his intelligence that Tophet had made the slight mistake of spelling *jail* with a *j*. This explained the mystery, and he understood that Nelly Dare had been compelled to fly, to escape the plotting of her father and Rafe Stinson, and that Rube Warnick had assisted her to make her escape. They had happened to take refuge at the place where he had left Tophet, and would probably remain there until he should come to them.

His thoughts were then bent on escape, and he soon hit upon a plan by which he could hope to get away from his too close friends, the Comanches.

His horse, from which the saddle and bridle had not been removed, was grazing at a little distance from the camp, tethered by a lariat and picket-pin.

He slyly pointed out the horse to Wolf, and directed the dog, by signs that were well understood between them, to go out there and watch the horse.

Wolf sneaked away, while his master's back was turned, as if endeavoring to escape, and the Indians raised an outcry, to inform Archer that the Medicine-dog was taking himself off.

Archer stepped toward the dog, motioning to the Indians not to interrupt him, and walked slowly away from the camp, attitudinizing, gesticulating, and jabbering furiously in High Dutch. Wolf moved slowly off as his master advanced, growling and showing his teeth, as if he understood the game that was being played.

In this manner Archer reached his horse, about twenty yards from the camp. The horse was quietly feeding, the dog was a little in advance, and the Indians were sitting or standing about the fire, intently watching the performance.

Suddenly the young man bent down, pulled up the picket-pin, threw the lariat over the horse's neck, jumped on his back, and was off like an arrow from the bow.

The Indians uttered a simultaneous cry of surprise and terror, seized their weapons, and sent after the flying horseman a shower of bullets and arrows.

This was the supreme moment of danger for Archer. He had exercised his judgment of horse-flesh, when he compelled the chief to give him a horse, by choosing one of great speed and endurance, and he thought that he had the best horse in the band. He believed that he could distance the Indians and make good his escape, if he should get a fair start. He only dreaded the pelting that would greet him at the commencement of the race.

He dug his spurs into the flanks of the horse, and bent down upon his neck, to present as little surface as possible to the aim of the Indians. Bullets and arrows whistled and

whizzed about him ; but he was untouched, and the horse fairly flew as it carried him out of the reach of danger.

He had a good start and believed he could hold it, unless some accident should occur. Wolf ran ahead, leading the way, and leaving him free to concentrate his thoughts upon the management of his horse. Nothing troubled him but the loss of his rifle, which he had been compelled to leave in the camp of the Comanches ; but his six-shooters were both in his belt, and he had reason to hope that he would not have occasion to use any weapons.

Hour after hour he sped on, shaping his course toward the peak that arose in the distance, in a direction a little south of west. His horse, although kept at the top of his speed, showed no signs of tiring, and he could see the Indians, as he mounted a rise of the prairie, far behind him, but still straining every nerve to overtake him.

He had also seen, when he had a good outlook toward the east, the wagons of Colonel Worsham's train, slowly moving over the prairie, so far off as to be scarcely distinguishable. The Comanches spread to the west, in order to cut him off from the train ; but this was a matter of no consequence to Archer, who had no idea of seeking a refuge in that direction.

When he considered himself far enough ahead of his pursuers, and safe to reach the mountain before night, he reined in his horse, and let him go at an easy gait, to save his strength and wind for such emergencies as might yet happen.

Before he reached his destination, he had reason to commend himself for his forethought.

It was dusk when he came to the broken ground that lay at the base of the hills ; but there was light enough to enable him to perceive, in the shadow of the timber, a number of mounted men, who appeared to be white men.

Who could they be, and what could they be doing there ? Although they were white men, it did not follow that they were friends, and he stopped his horse for the purpose of examining them more closely.

As he did so, two of the men rode forward, beckoning and calling to him, and he recognized Bill Dare and Rafe Stinson.

These men could not be friends, and were there, no doubt,

for the purpose of searching for Nell Dare. Archer, determined not to fall into their hands, did not answer their signals, but turned his horse to the right and rode off at an easy gallop.

The outlaws, baffled in their first intent, leveled their rifles and fired at the young man, but without effect, and then spurred their horses in pursuit, followed by several others.

Archer pressed his horse harder, and held his course toward the west, until he perceived that a quick turn to the left would leave his pursuers in the rear, and he accomplished the maneuver successfully, though a few rifle-shots told him that it had not been without danger.

Across his path, just before he entered the timber, lay a gully. It was impossible to flank this obstacle, and it seemed out of the question to attempt to cross it. But Archer saw in the gully a means of safety, rather than a source of danger. He rushed his horse at the chasm, raised him to the leap, and landed safe on the other side, although the animal quivered all over after the perilous feat.

With a cry of defiance Archer rode away through the timber, leaving his pursuers to scramble across the gully as well as they might.

Soon he heard yells behind him, and recognized the peculiar cries of the Comanches, which were answered by the shouts of the borderers. Supposing that his red and white adversaries would come into collision, he gladly left them to fight it out, and made haste to reach the mountain, where he rode into the valley which he and Tophet had previously found, turned his horse loose, and commenced to ascend the terraced side of the peak.

CHAPTER XI.

RUBE'S MISSION.

Not knowing where his friends might be found, Archer suffered the dog to lead him up over the rocks and through the brush, and followed close at his heels, until Wolf's excited bark, and Tophet's joyful shout, told them that he need seek for them no further.

"Yar he is!" exclaimed Tophet. "Yar's Mass'r Charley! Come quick, Mass'r Rube!"

"Don't make such a row, you big booby!" said Archer, as he caught sight of the negro's woolly pate and grinning mouth. "Some white people have been chasing me, and they may find me if they hear your racket."

"No danger of that," said Rube Warnick, as he stepped forward and took Archer by the hand. "We've been watchin' 'em. 'Twar Bill Dare and Rafe Stinson, with some of thar crowd. They lost the trail, I reckon, or stopped down yonder, or went back."

"Where is the girl?"

"Just up here. Come and git a chunk of deer-meat, and rest a bit."

Nell Dare thought herself fortunate in the fact that it was quite dark when she met Charley Archer; for she knew that she was blushing. The darkness hid her blushes, but could not conceal the trembling of her voice as she spoke to him.

When he had finished his "chunk of deer-meat," he lighted a pipe and settled himself to listen to the reports of Rube Warnick and Tophet.

"I reckon I mought as well tell you all about it, as Tophet thar ain't fond of talkin'," said Rube. "Tophe, he watched up yander in the hole whar the lake and the leeble stum house are, as you tole him to. A man kim thar at night, and looked about, and staid in the stum house a while, and looked about ag'in, and went away without diggin'. That man was Bill Dare."

Archer started, and looked at Nell significantly.

"Last night he kin ag'in," continued Rube, "and he did jest as he had done afore, and went off jest in the same way. As Wolf and Tophe war both away, I had to look arter things here, knowing that Rafe Stinson and t'other chaps would be huntin' us among the hills. I was sartin that they wouldn't find this place, unless they should happen to stumble onto it, and so I cached Miss Nell, and kept a look-out at the openin' thar."

"Arter a while I heerd somebody sneakin' and fumblin' about, and then he raised hisself up, and peeked in here. I laid back until he got fa'rly in at the openin', when I grapped him. The blarsted fool showed fight, and I had to slip my knife in atween his ribs."

"Did you kill him, Rube?"

"Couldn't help it. He was a powerful cuss, and he fit so, that one of us had to go under, and my business was here, and his warn't. I hauled him in, and put him under the airth, and tuck keer of his rifle and fixin's."

"I am very sorry that you were obliged to kill him; but am glad that you have got a spare rifle, as I left mine with the Comanches. Was the man one of Stinson's gang?"

"He belonged to that crowd."

"As you say, they must know that we are in the hills, and will be looking for us. But they will not bother us, I think, for a while, as they have other business on hand just now. They have met my Comanches, no doubt, and will have to look out for their own scalps."

"Hope they will fight, and I don't ear' which whips."

"It would be a good riddance if they would settle each other after the fashion of the Kilkenny cats. For my part, I shall not interfere to keep the peace between them."

"Whar's Colonel Worsham's train, Charley?"

"It can't be far away. I had it in sight this evening, as I was running from the Comanches. We must open communications with the Colonel, Rube."

"Do what?"

"One of us must go and meet him, and let him know how matters stand with us. How would you like the trip?"

"First rate, ef you will put me on the trail."

"I will give you the bearings, and you will find it easy enough to strike the train, provided you don't get snapped up on the way. You will have to keep clear of the white men and the red skins, and it will be a risky business I am afraid."

"I am stillenin' up, Charley, far want of suthin' to do, and will be glad of a little risky work. Shall hev to go afoot, and reckon I had better start right off."

Warnick did not find his task as difficult as he had supposed it would be.

The red savages and the white savages, instead of hunting Charley Archer and his friends, had settled down to watch each other, and it was only necessary for Rube to avoid the scouts that had been thrown out by each party, to ascertain the position and movements of the other. To such a practiced woodman as Rube Warnick, this was comparatively an easy matter, and he "wired in and wired out," until he was fairly out of the reach of all his adversaries.

He took occasion, as he went along, to reconnoiter each band on his own account. The white men were posted in a strong position, with their camp well guarded, and the Indians had followed their example. Each party had been surprised at meeting the other, and both, being intent on other objects, had been unwilling to come in collision with a formidable force from which nothing could be gained but hard knocks and dearly-purchased scalps.

As Rube Warnick remarked, they were both in a "primed-dary," and found the presence of each other exceeding awkward.

Having satisfied himself on these points, Rube paid his respects to the Comanches by borrowing a horse from them without their permission, and rode off toward the east, taking a course that he hoped would bring him to Colonel Worsham's train.

When day broke, he knew that he had not missed the mark badly, as he could then see the smoke of the morning fires several miles to the north. He put his Comanche mustang to his speed, and reached the train just as Colonel Worsham was about to break camp and resume his journey.

There was the usual amount of excitement in the camp as he rode up; but, as it was quickly perceived that he was a

white man and a friend, he was cordially welcomed and requested to make himself at home. When it was known who he was and where he came from, he was pressed to give an account of himself and to tell what had become of Charley Archer. As he brought the news that that young gentleman was safe and well, he at once found himself a great favorite in the camp, especially with Mrs. Worsham and Emma Langley.

Colonel Worsham wanted to hasten his train forward, in order that he might be at hand to render assistance to Archer, in case it should be needed.

Rube Warnick did not object to this ; but he was resolute in urging the Colonel to stop and go into camp, two or three hours before sunset.

"This is sech a good campin'-ground," he said, when Colonel Worsham objected to stopping, on account of the earliness of the hour.

"But we can find another good camping-ground further on, urged the Colonel, "and we have got time enough to travel six or eight miles."

"We won't find sech a good place as this, kunnel. Here's water and wood, and thar's a thick chapparal on the right and a deep gully on the left. It would be a powerful good thing to hev two sides guarded, ef it should come to a skrimmage."

"That is very true ; but we do not expect a fight."

"Maybe not ; but it may come, fur all that. We may hev to fight red-men, or white men, or both together. I don't purtend to say that those white Injuns hev kin up here fur to watch this train and to take it ef they kin git a chance ; but I know that they are mean enough to do it, and I'd like to know what else they are here fur. You know that the red Injuns hev been follerin' you like a pack of wolves, and you know what *they* want. It needn't be a bit surprisin' to to anybody, ef the two packs of varmints should j'ine together, to do what each would be afeard to undertake single-handed. I know fur sartin that reds and whites hev been watchin' us to-day, and they hain't been doin' that out of any good will fur us. It's my opeenyon that we ort to know when we're well off, and stop right here."

Colonel Worsham finally fell in with the trapper's views, and camp was struck on the ridge that Warnick had selected. The wagons were placed with even more care than usual, the single narrow opening was better guarded, the sentries were doubled, and the arms of all were overhauled and cleaned and carefully reloaded.

These preparations were not completed when it was announced that two horsemen were approaching the camp from the south-west.

Warnick examined them carefully while they were yet at a distance, and was soon ready with his opinion of them.

"They are white men," he said, "some of those folks from down yander. They are comin' right straight on, as ef thar warn't no Injuns nowhar, and one of two things is sartin, kunnel."

"What's that, my friend?"

"Eyther the Indians hev gone away, or they hev j'ined with those chaps ag'inst us. It won't be long afore we'll find out which it is. Jest let those two chaps come into camp, kunnel, and let 'em say thar say. It would be a good thing to hide a few of your men in the chapparal, as they may be comin' to count us, and we kin trick 'em a leetle on thet p'int. It won't do fur me to show afore 'em, as they mought know me, and I'll crawl into a waggin, so's to be in hearin' and out of sight."

"They may want to make us an offer," said Colonel Worsham, "or to propose some sort of a bargain. If they should, I would like to know what you think about it, before answering them."

"Jest so. That's easy enough fixed. Ef I think you ort to agree to what they say, you'll hear a dog growlin' in the waggin."

The suggestions of the trapper seemed to be so sensible, that Colonel Worsham at once carried them into effect. Six of the negroes, together with three white men, were instructed to conceal themselves in the chapparal, and to remain there until the strangers should depart. Rube Warnick stowed himself away in a wagon, and Colonel Worsham and his son Tom removed the barrier at the entrance to the camp, to allow the two horsemen to come in.

CHAPTER XII.

A THREE-SIDED BARGAIN.

BILL DARE and Rafe Stinson had set out together in pursuit of Charley Archer, as soon as he came in sight of their camp ; but they and their followers were considerably delayed by the passage of the gully over which he had made such a successful leap.

When they got across, Archer was so far ahead as to be out of sight, and they could only attempt to follow his trail. This was slow work, as darkness was coming on so rapidly, and they were soon compelled to abandon the task, by the shouts of the men whom they had left behind, and by the answering yells of Indians, telling them of a danger which they had not suspected.

They hastened back to camp, and collected their men on a ridge, which offered a good position for repelling an attack, in case the Indians should be disposed to fight them.

But the Comanches had no such intention. Suddenly finding themselves in the presence of a formidable body of white men, they were rather inclined to back out than to go forward, and were more willing to lose their Fire-eater than to stand the hazard of a battle. Accordingly, the two parties remained facing and watching each other, until darkness closed down upon the scene, and then went into camp, using every possible precaution to guard against surprise.

When Dare and Stinson settled themselves for a confab, after they had satisfied the wants of their inner individuals, neither of them was in a pleasant humor.

They had been, it seemed to them, just a little too late for the successful accomplishment of every undertaking. Rube Warnick and Nell Dare had safely got away into the hills, just as the pursuers were on their heels, and no efforts had yet availed to find them. One of the best men among Stinson's followers, who had been searching for them, was missing, and had probably been killed, or had lost his way.

Then Charley Archer had slipped away, just when they thought they had him in their hands—when they had forbore to fire at him, as they felt sure of being able to take him alive.

To crown all, a band of Comanches had come sweeping down from the north, just when they were expecting Colonel Worsham's train from the east, and had, they feared, blocked their game in that direction. They might be more than a match for the Indians alone, but they knew that it would be useless to attempt to fight the Indians and then capture the train.

As they were talking, without coming to any conclusion that would lead them out of their difficulty, a suggestion was made by Sam Rogers, one of Stinson's followers, that made Bill Dare start up as if an idea had struck him in a tender place.

Rogers stated that the Indians were Comanches, and that he was acquainted with the chief or leader of the band, whose name was San Croce. He believed that it would be possible to make a bargain with the Indians, and plunder the train with their help.

"That's it!" exclaimed Dare, snapping his fingers. "The red-skins have been follerin' that train, it's likely, for a long time, waitin' for a chance to stampede it. If it hadn't been too strong for 'em, they'd have struck it long afore now. They've got sense enough to know that half a loaf is better than no bread, and will be glad to jine us in this spec, and we'll be glad to have 'em. Won't we, Rafe?"

Stinson was by no means as enthusiastic as his comrade, and did not reply until Dare again called his attention to the feasibility of the project, asking him why he did not favor it.

"I have nothing to say against the plan," he answered. "It will work like a charm if the red-skins will take hold of it with us, and I have no doubt they will, as they must be half starved for plunder. The affair can be easily managed so as to give them the brunt of the fighting, and that will be a great point gained. I was only thinking about myself, and wondering how I could contrive to keep out of their way."

"Why do you want to keep out of their way?" asked Dare.

"They have a severe grudge against me, old man."

"What is it?"

"You must have heard of it. Some three years ago they annoyed us so much, and we had succeeded so poorly in fighting them, that we concluded to make peace with them. So we invited about fifty chiefs and warriors to a talk, and made them believe that it was all on the square. We had liquor and presents for them, and at last got them shut up in a log house. Then we turned in on them with our rifles and pistols, and shot them all down through the windows and cracks of the house. We got the scalps of the whole party, and sold them at El Paso for Mexican gold and silver."

Brutal as they were, the men who listened to Stinson's cold-blooded recital of the cold-blooded and cowardly murder could not help shuddering.

"I have heard of that business," said Dare; "but I didn't know that you were mixed up in it."

"I was the leader of the party that wiped out those Comanches. The whole tribe swore vengeance against me, and they will keep their oath if they can. They all know me by name, and there are plenty of them, I reckon, who know my face. But you and Sam Rogers can go over and make the bargain with them, if you want to, and I will keep out of their way until the time comes for work. Then I will put on a false beard that I have in my 'possible' sack, and I can defy them to know me when I wear that."

A good watch was kept at the camp that night, to guard against surprise, and the next morning Dare and Rogers opened communications with the Comanches, whom they found accessible, and who were willing enough to talk when an arrangement was proposed by which they might gain something.

It was agreed that scouts should be sent out, by both parties, to watch the movements of the expected train. At the first convenient camping-place it was to be visited by some of the white men, who were to discover its strength in men and arms, and to arrange a plan by which it could be captured with the least possible danger to the attacking parties.

Early in the evening the scouts came in, and reported that the train was about to encamp at the distance of some

two miles from the camps of the outlaws and the Comanches.

Stinson and another man at once mounted their horses, and rode out to the train, where they were kindly received by Colonel Worsham.

Stinson, who was the spokesman, stated that they had come from a party of Texans who were encamped near the hills, and who had come into the upper country for the purpose of chastising a band of Indians who had been committing depredations upon the settlements. They had come across the band of which they were in search, he said, or some other band, but did not feel strong enough to attack them, and they wished Colonel Worsham and his men to join them in the enterprise.

"The Indians have done us no harm," remarked the Colonel. "I don't know why we should fight them."

"The cause of one is the cause of all," replied Stinson. "Unless all the settlers join against them, no one will be safe. This, too, is a peculiar case, and you are interested in it personally. These Comanches are between your camp and mine. I can't move toward the north without coming in collision with them, and you can't go to the south until they are out of the way, as they block up your path. As the matter stands now, neither of us would be safe to move, alone; but we can move together, and clear out the red-skins easily enough."

"That sounds reasonable. What do you propose to do?"

"I propose to attack the Comanches in their camp to-night, about two hours before daybreak. If you will agree to the arrangement, I will attack them on the south side, while you move out and attack them on this side."

The growling of a dog was heard, proceeding from the wagon in which Rube Warnick was concealed.

"Your proposition is fair enough," said Colonel Worsham, "and I have no doubt that the plan could be easily carried out. I had resolved not to fight, as long as I could keep from fighting, because I was unwilling to risk the lives of my people."

"There is no risk in this."

"Not much, I believe. How many men have you?"

"Fifty. How many have you?"

"There are fifteen men in this camp."

"Is that all? I supposed, from the size of the train, that you must have at least twenty-five. But there will be enough. We will outnumber the Comanches, and we can't fail to stampede them, coming upon them unawares, and attacking them in front and rear. Can I rely upon you to start out, at the hour I named?"

The dog in the wagon growled again.

"Certainly," replied Colonel Worsham. "I will only leave a small camp guard with the wagons. Won't you stop and eat something with us?"

"No, thank you. I must hurry back and get my people ready for work, and we must all have a few hours' sleep."

When Stinson and his companion had left the camp, Rube Warnick came out from the wagon, with a quizzical smile on his face.

"Did ye hear the pup a grumblin', Kunnel?" he asked.

"Yes; and I accepted the stranger's proposition; but I don't pretend to understand the matter. He seems to be quite a gentlemanly sort of man."

"Smooth and iley, ain't he? That's the chap who wanted to pick a fuss with Charley; but he concluded it wouldn't pay, and backed down. Reckon he's about as mean a devil as thar is livin', even in Texas."

"Is it safe, then, to join with him for the purpose of whipping the Comanches?"

"Not a bit of it."

"But I have promised to do so."

"You ain't gwine to do it, though, Kunnel."

"Then you have made me tell him a lie."

"I'd rayther you wouldn't put it that way. When a man is tryin' to swindle you, it's fair and right that you should turn about and swindle him, ef you kin do it."

"I wish you would let me understand what you mean."

"It's jest here, Kunnel. I said that we would soon find out whether the Injuns had gone away, or had jined with those chaps ag'inst us. They hain't gone away, and t'other thing follers along naturally as a fresh arter a thaw. Ef those chaps hadn't been on good terms with the Comanch', they couldn't hev come up here, in open day, without gittin' hurt."

The notion is, I take it, to git you outside of the camp, whar they kin clean you out tofable easy."

"Why, then, should I promise to go out and join them?"

"Ef two chaps should be arter you, Kunnel, to whip you, and you should git 'em to fightin' with each other, that would take at least one fight off your hands."

"No doubt of that."

"Wal, then; one of two things is apt to be true. P'raps they mean to git you out on the open. Ef they do, the whites and the reals will lay fur you together. When you don't come, the reds will accuse the whites of cheatin' 'em, and it's likely to wind up in a row. P'raps, ag'in, those chaps do really mean to pitch inter the Comanch'. Ef they do, it's the old story of dog eat dog. The more that git killed on both sides, the better it will be fur honest folks."

"There is nothing for us to do, then, I suppose, but wait and see what will happen."

"Adzackly so. We must stay right here. When they've fit thar fight out, it's likely that thar'll be a chance fur us to move on."

CHAPTER XIII.

EL MATADOR!

RARE STINSON was not in a very pleasant humor when he got back to camp.

The Indians, who had been dogging Colonel Worsham's train for a long time, had informed Sam Rogers that it contained as many as twenty-five fighting men, and that they had not ventured to attack it, because it was so strong. Stinson had been told by Colonel Worsham, and his own eyes had shown him, that there were but fifteen men connected with the train, and that most of those were negroes.

If he had not been misinformed in this respect, he would have felt strong enough to attack the train with his own party, and would not have been under the necessity of dividing the

spoils with his red allies. As it was, the bargain had been made, and he must stick to it.

Intending that the Comanches should bear the brunt of the fighting, he sent Sam Rogers over to their camp, to stimulate the eagerness of their chief, by telling him of the beautiful white girl who was with the train, and to whom he would be welcome as a part of his share of the plunder.

San Croce needed nothing more to arouse his energy, and promised to be first in the attack with his warriors, all of whom were furious for a fight.

It was arranged that both parties should proceed to the rendezvous dismounted, so that they might be the better able to ambush their adversaries. The Comanches were to conceal themselves in a piece of timber, near the route by which Colonel Worsham's people were expected to come, and the white men were to hide in a hollow nearly opposite to the bunch of timber. It was not doubted that they would be able to destroy the little band of emigrants, with small loss to themselves.

These preliminaries completed, the white and red savages laid down to rest in their respective camps, not neglecting to guard against treachery by keeping a good watch over each other.

Both parties set out at the appointed hour, leaving small camp guards to take care of their horses, and repaired to their respective places of rendezvous.

When they had waited patiently during half an hour, and there were no signs of the approach of Colonel Worsham's party, Stinson sent several of his men, with an equal number of the Indians, a short distance back toward the camp, instructing them to begin a sham battle, with the usual accompaniments of shots, yells and war-whoops.

By this means he hoped that Colonel Worsham might be induced to believe that the attack upon the Comanches had commenced, and that he would hasten to assist his allies by falling on the rear of the Indian camp.

This device was not successful, and the red and white savages still waited in vain for their victims.

The temper of the Comanches was not at all improved by this position of affairs, and their dissatisfaction began

to make itself manifest by murmurs that were both loud and deep.

Sam Rogers went over among them, and attempted to soothe their ruffled feelings by assuring them that the disappointment was not caused by the fault of himself and his friends, but by the exceeding bad faith of the emigrants, who had neglected or refused to come out and be slaughtered, although they had expressly contracted so to do.

His explanation was not sufficient for the Comanches, who strongly suspected that the white men had inveigled them to that spot with some treacherous purpose, and who were inclined to resent what they believed to be ill-treatment. Their language to Rogers was any thing but complimentary, and he thought it best to return to his friends while he possessed a scalp to carry back to them.

"The long and short of it is, that we have made infernal fools of ourselves," said Stinson, at the council of war that was held to debate upon Sam Rogers' report. "If we had known the weakness of that train, we might have had it all to ourselves, without being annoyed by those red-skins. As the matter now stands, they believe that we have been trying to swindle them, and they are mad enough to kill us all, if they dare to try it. We have given them the best position, too; so that they will have a great advantage over us, if it comes to a skirmish."

"It will come to a skirmish, fur sartin," said Rogers, "unless they kin be talked out of their mad fit. We had better git out of this hole, so's we kin hev suthin' like an even chance with the varmints."

"If we could git 'em to j'ine us," suggested Bill Dare, "we mought all go back and git our hosses, and then ride right up to the train and take it. There's time enough yet."

"It would be better to go without the horses," replied Stinson. "It is now near daybreak, and there is no time to spare. Besides, we could creep up on them better without the horses, and the red-skins would be more likely to stand up to their work."

"Let's go and talk to 'em, Rafo. You can palaver 'em better than any of us."

"I don't like to do it, old man. They might recognize me, and then we would be sure to have a fight on our hands."

"You needn't be afraid of that. Your best friend, old Satan himself, wouldn't know you while you wear that black beard."

"Very well. It is certain that something must be done. I am not afraid of the red imps; but I don't want to throw away any of our lives for the sake of a few Comanche scalps. Whatever happens, it will be much better for us to be out of this hole than in it."

Stinson, with Dare and Rogers, went up into "the open," and signified to the Comanches that they desired an interview with some of the principal men.

The interview took place at the edge of the timber, and most of the Indians came out of their concealment, and mingled freely with the white men, who had come up from the gully. It was not in a friendly manner that they mingled, although there was nothing positively uncivil in their demeanor. Both sides eyed each other suspiciously, prepared, upon the slightest hint from their leaders, to use the weapons that were ready in their hands.

Stinson represented to the Comanche chief, through Sam Rogers, who officiated as interpreter, that he and his party had acted in good faith, and that they were not responsible for the failure of the emigrants to keep their promise. He gave an account of his visit to Colonel Worsham's camp, of his talk with that gentleman, and of the agreement that he had made with him, by which he had hoped to draw him out of his camp. He assured the Comanche that his tongue was straight, that he was utterly incapable of lying, and that he could only suppose that the emigrant chief, in some unaccountable manner, had been led to suspect that harm was intended toward him.

In conclusion, he said that good friends ought not to fall out because of a disappointment that neither of them could have foreseen or prevented. The emigrants were still there, and there was still an excellent chance to capture their train, and to get an abundance of scalps and horses, and other plunder, together with a beautiful white girl. The united

force of the Comanches and their white friends would be sufficient to overwhelm the emigrants with little risk to themselves, as there were only fifteen fighting men in charge of the train.

To the latter part of this speech San Croce replied quite brusquely, saying that he knew the white chief's statement to be untrue, as he had himself counted the men who traveled with the train, and there were more than twenty of them.

Stinson repeated his assertion, declaring that the white chief in charge of the train had told him that he had but fifteen fighting men, and that he had himself counted only fifteen in the camp.

At this San Croce held up his fingers, and counted twenty-five, vowing that he would believe his own eyes sooner than the tongue of any white man, and impudently asked whether the white chief believed that he could again deceive the Comanches, and induce them to throw away their scalps for his benefit. His people, he said, had once suffered from trusting the crooked tongues of the white men, and many of their best warriors had been basely murdered at a peace-talk to which they had been invited. As the white chief had lied to him on one point, he might have lied on all, and the Comanches could trust him no more.

Stinson's face flushed like fire where it was not covered by his heavy beard, and the men who stood near him tightened their grasp upon their rifles, and half drew the pistols from their belts, in momentary expectation of a collision.

But the collision was not destined to come exactly in that way.

A disturbance had taken place among another group of white men and Indians, in which sour looks had been succeeded by harsh words, and a harsh word had been followed by a blow.

A white man, losing control of his temper, knocked down an Indian. In an instant his comrades and the Indians who stood near had raised their weapons, and one of the older, if not wiser heads, thinking to quell the disturbance, called out to Stinson:

"Cap'n Stinson! Cap'n Stinson! Come hyar and make hese chaps put up thar shootin'-irons."

As the word "Stinson" was pronounced, the Comanche chief started, and his eyes blazed like balls of fire.

It was a clear, starlit night, with streaks of dawn just beginning to show in the east, and light enough to enable objects to be easily discovered at a short distance.

Stinson turned quickly when his name was called, and his false beard, catching on the limb of a tree, was torn off, and fell upon the ground.

"*El Matador!*" shouted the Comanche, as he raised his tomahawk, and sent it whirling at the head of the slayer of his brethren.

Stinson dodged just in time to avoid the missile, and fired his rifle at his foe. Knowing that the conflict was not any longer to be avoided, he rushed among the Indians with his pistols, calling upon his men to follow him.

They were ready enough to obey him, and the Comanches were equally ready to meet the onset. Then ensued the cracking of rifles and pistols, with the usual accompaniments of fire and smoke, and sulphureous smell, the shouts and yells of the combatants, and the shrieks and groans of the dying.

During a few moments there reigned a carnival of slaughter, the struggling forms of the red-men and the whites being mingled in seemingly inextricable confusion. Then the combat slackened, and both sides drew off a little, to take breath, and a view of the situation.

It was well for Stinson and his party that they had come up to the edge of the timber, as the Comanches, with the advantage of its shelter, would have been able to mow them down without much risk to themselves. As it was, when the Indians sought the cover of the timber, the white men rushed in after them, and there was a hand-to-hand conflict among the stunted trees and the tangled undergrowth. In this the superior weapons and strength of the white men prevailed, and they perceived, when they looked over the field, that they were in a much better position than the Comanches to renew the encounter.

The lull was soon over, and the carnage again commenced. The Comanches would have consulted their safety by taking to their heels; but their blood was up, and they were wild

for vengeance. San Croce, although he was wounded, sought Rafe Stinson with the fury of a famished tiger, and his followers fought as if they did not care to preserve their own lives, but to inflict as much damage as possible upon their enemies.

But the white men gradually forced their antagonists through the timber, and out into "the open," where they had them at their mercy, as the white savages could still shelter themselves behind the trees, while the red savages were unprotected.

In this exposed situation, and with their ranks fearfully thinned, the Comanches were compelled to abandon the unequal fight. With a yell of despair, more horrible than even their shout of victory would have been, they turned and fled toward their camp, closely pursued by the enraged and remorseless borderers.

Fleet of foot than the Comanches, the white men followed, and shot or struck them down as they fled, determined not to desist from the slaughter as long as there was a scalp to be taken.

Not more than a third of the Indians survived. Most of these succeeded in reaching their camp, and escaped by means of the speed of their horses. A few took refuge in the hills, where they found hiding-places into which they could not easily be followed.

CHAPTER XIV.

RUBE WARNICK GETS EVEN.

It was a sad business for Rafe Stinson and Bill Dare to count up the losses in their band after the terrible fight with the Comanches. Nearly half their men were killed or badly wounded. In return for this fearful sacrifice of life, they had only the scalps of a number of Comanches—trophies, it is true, but unsubstantial trophies, and so dearly purchased that even these wild and brutal men shuddered to look at them.

Each white man considered his life worth those of at least a dozen Indians, and all were angered when they felt that they had lost so much and gained so little.

It was useless to expect to capture Colonel Worsham's train, unless they could attack it on the route and with all the advantage on their side, and they knew that the wary and cautious leader of the train would never afford them such a chance. It was evident that he had suspected treachery, if he had not really discovered their intentions, and there could be no doubt that he would now be more watchful and suspicious than ever.

There was only one thing left for them to do, as Stinson said, and in this Bill Dare agreed with him. They could search the hills for Nell Dare and her friends, and in this employment they did not consider themselves likely to be molested by Colonel Worsham's people.

Nothing could be done in that matter, however, until they should recover from the effects of a wakeful night and the fatigue of their Comanche combat. For this purpose they required a day's rest, especially as the morning was consumed in burying the bodies of their friends. The carcasses of their enemies they left to the wolves and buzzards.

The men in general laid upon Stinson the blame of their disaster—for their victory could be regarded in no other light than that of a disaster. Stinson transferred the blame to Bill Dare, because he had advised the coalition with the Comanches for the purpose of capturing the train. Dare shifted it back to Stinson, because he had been discovered and recognized by the Comanches as the murderer of their people. Under these circumstances, the state of feeling that pervaded the camp of the outlaws was any thing but amiable.

This state of affairs, however, did not prevent Bill Dare from paying due attention to the matters that more nearly interested himself. To discover the hiding-place of the money that he had brought from Louisiana was of more importance to him than the capture of Colonel Worsham's train or the recovery of Nelly. He still believed, as he had been assured in his vision, that the place where he had buried the treasure would be ultimately pointed out to him, if he should be in the valley in the heart of the mountain at the right time of

the moon. He was resolved, in the plenitude of his faith, not to let slip any chance of making the discovery.

Every night since he had come into the vicinity, with the exception of one, he had ascended the mountain to the beautiful valley, had walked around the lake, and had rested in the little stone house, hoping to see the vision that would point out the burial-place of the treasure. He had been disappointed thus far, but was not at all discouraged. He had no certain means of informing himself of the exact time of the change of the moon, and could only make the matter sure by visiting the spot every night.

As soon as it was dark he quietly left the camp, and took the nearest route through the timber to the mountain.

Rafe Stinson, who had been aware of the old man's nocturnal journeyings, but had not been made acquainted with their direction or purpose, was naturally inquisitive concerning them. Knowing that his own motives were bad and treacherous, he suspected the actions and motives of all others, and was particularly suspicious of the thoughts and doings of Bill Dare, who, he believed, would betray him or throw him overboard, without the least compunction of conscience.

He determined to follow the old man, and learn the meaning of his nightly absences.

Soon after Bill Dare had left the camp, Stinson slipped out after him, and followed him through the timber and up the terraced side of the mountain.

This was a proceeding that required a great deal of caution: as Bill Dare, fully as suspicious as his comrade, had a lively fear of being watched, and was continually looking back, to make sure that no one was following him. Thus it happened that Stinson, while he was confirmed in his suspicions of a man who was so careful to conceal his movements, was obliged to be on the alert to guard himself against discovery. This made his game a difficult one; but its difficulty acted upon him only as a stimulus to better play.

The extreme darkness of the night enabled the spy to evade Bill Dare's close scrutiny, and he at last reached the plateau where the entrance to the valley was to be found.

Here Dare paused, took a final glance around and behind him, to make sure that no prying eyes were upon him, while

Stinson waited at the edge of the plateau, crouched down behind a rock. Having satisfied himself that he was alone, Dare went in at the entrance, carefully followed at a safe distance by Stinson.

The latter was surprised, when he had come into the little valley, to perceive the strange and beautiful place into which he had been led. Its beauty was lost upon him, not only because of the deep darkness, but because of his inability to appreciate sublimity in nature ; yet he could not help wondering at this wild and marvelous recess in such an unexpected situation.

He followed Dare into the valley, and concealed himself in a little niche in the rocky wall, that he might see all that was done, without being seen by the person whom he was watching.

Dare walked slowly around the little lake, stopping every now and then, and looking about him anxiously. At times, while he was making this circuit, Stinson lost sight of him, and was obliged to step out of his niche to look for him, and to rush back when his form again came in view.

When he had finished his walk round the lake, Dare carefully looked about him again, and then entered the little stone house that was built against the cliff.

He remained there such a long time, that Stinson grew tired of waiting, and was several times on the point of going to the house for the purpose of seeing what he was doing there. But he restrained himself, and was perhaps wise in doing so, as Dare came out of the hut just when he had fully made up his mind to go to it.

Dare again looked about him, again made the circuit of the lake, looked about him for the last time, and slowly left the valley.

Stinson did not follow him out. He was anxious to penetrate the mystery of the little stone house, and remained for that purpose.

When he believed that Dare was fairly out of the way, and that there was no danger of his return, he went to the hut, looked in, and then entered it.

As it was very dark inside the hut, and he could see nothing at all, he stepped out and collected some dry leaves and

sticks, which he carried in for the purpose of starting a fire to give light.

He had struck a match, and was bending down to nurse the little flame, when a rough hand was laid on his shoulder, and a rough voice addressed him.

He started up, but was rudely thrown down, and a heavy knee was set on his breast, and, in spite of his struggles, he was bound hand and foot with a stout lariat.

The man who effected this capture fanned the flame until it became a bright blaze. As he turned around, Stinson recognized the face and form of Rube Warnick.

"What do you mean by this?" he asked. "What right have you to pull me down and tie me in this manner?"

"I've been meanin' fur a good while to git even with you," replied Warnick, "and my time has come now."

"You have? What have I ever done to you?"

"Do you know me, Rafe Stinson?"

"Yes, you are Rube Warnick."

"You know my name well enough; but you don't know *me*, I reckon. Do you remember a pore cuss of a trapper, who kim down to Bent's one't, with eight thousand dollars in a pile? He'd swore never to drink no more liquor, but to settle down like white folks. You got arter him, and set him to drinkin', and stole every cent he had, with your cussed monté and other tricks, and cleaned him out, down to his rifle and blanket. Don't remember him, do ye?"

"If I did win his money, it was in a fair game. I didn't make him play, and he stood as good a chance to win as I did."

"That's a lie, Rafe Stinson. That's three lies, hand-runnin'. You did make him play, and it warn't a fair game, and he stood no better chance to win than you stand to go to heaven. Turn about is fair play, and I mean to put you through the same style of game, and see how you like it yourself."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that you shall play me the fust game of seven-up fur your scalp. Ef you win, you shall keep it; ef you lose, I shall take it."

The trapper drew from the inside pocket of his hunting-

shirt a greasy pack of cards, and laid them on the ground near the fire.

"There is nothing fair in that," said Stinson. "I put up all, and you put up nothing."

"I did my puttin' up, thar at Bent's. It's a heap fairer game than you deserve, and you've got to play it."

"How can I play, with my hands tied?"

"I'll fix it, so's you kin handle the keards."

The trapper untied Stinson's hands, and passed the lariat around his body and above his elbows, pinioning his arms to his side, but leaving his hands free. Then he shuffled the cards, cut for the deal, won it, and dealt each a hand.

Either Stinson, confined as he was, was still able to manipulate the cards to suit himself, or he had an excellent run of luck. He continued to gain upon his adversary, until he had six points, while Warnick had made but four. As he needed but one point, and it was his "beg," the chances were all in his favor, and no wonder that his eyes brightened.

The trapper dealt, and Stinson begged. Warnick dealt another hand, and turned up a jack. Then he took two cards from his hand, and replaced them by two that he picked out of the "deck."

"What do you mean by that?" roared Stinson. "Do you call that a fair game?"

"It's as fa'r a show as you giv' me, up to Bent's. Do you reckon that I meant fur you to win, you durned skunk? Here's high, low and jack. You may hev the game ef you want it; but I'm out, and that skulp is mine."

"If you meant to murder me, you might have told me so at first," said Stinson, as he threw down the cards.

"So I mought; but I wanted to give you as good a chance as you give me, up to Bent's. Come out here, now, and settle up."

The trapper dragged Stinson out of the hut, and set him on his feet. Then he drew a horn-handled knife from his belt, and felt its edge.

Stinson was now fairly cowed, and began to beg for mercy most pitifully, promising the trapper that he would doubly repay his eight thousand dollars, if his life might be spared.

"Air you a good runner?" asked Warnick. "I allow to give you another chance. I'll take off these lashin's, and then, ef you kin outrun a bullet from my rifle, the skulp is yourn."

The trapper unbound his victim's feet and arms, keeping an eye out for treachery, and uttered a piercing yell as he drew off the last coil of the lariat.

Stinson darted away like an arrow from the bow, and Warnick stood, looking at him and laughing, with his rifle in his hand and the butt on the ground.

The night had passed, and the gray light of dawn had displaced the darkness of the valley.

"I am glad I let him go," said the trapper. "I wouldn't hev killed the cuss, arter all, to git back my eight thousand dollars."

As he spoke, another yell was heard—a yell full of rage and vengeance, and bloodthirstiness. An Indian, with blood on his face and hands, and scanty clothing, sprung up at the mouth of the valley, and closed with Rafe Stinson in a death-grapple.

The trapper ran forward, in time to see the Indian drive his knife into the body of his prostrate foe, and tear the reeking scalp from his head. Then, with a yell of defiance, and waving the bloody scalp, he rushed out upon the plateau.

Rube Warnick had raised his rifle to his shoulder, and had lowered it.

"Let him go, too," he muttered. "Ef what I hear is true, he did jest about right, and I'm glad the job is off my hands. I must fix up things here, ag'inst I mought want to play another little game."

CHAPTER XV.

THE VISION AT LAST.

THE disappearance of Rafe Stinson occasioned no little wonder and excitement in the camp of the outlaws. No one knew, when he had left the camp, in what direction he had gone, or what was the purpose of his departure.

His absence occasioned another delay in the search for Nelly and her friends. Bill Dare had no intention of abandoning that quest, but thought best to postpone it until the return of Stinson.

Night came, and the missing man had not made his appearance. The wonder and excitement among the outlaws increased, and some of them looked suspiciously at Bill Dare. It was known that there had been a coldness, almost amounting to a quarrel, between the two leaders, and it was considered at least possible that Dare, whose absence had been remarked, might have made away with his comrade. A consultation was held, between a few of the leading men, who determined, if Stinson should not return by the next morning, to accuse Dare of having murdered him, and force him to a confession.

The old man was not at all troubled by these suspicions, and it is probable that he was ignorant of them. He was so completely absorbed in the desire of recovering his lost treasure, that he had no thought for any thing else. He was so wrapped up in this, that the disappearance of Rafe Stinson affected him very slightly, if at all, and his apathy on that point increased the suspicion with which the others regarded him. If he had not known the cause and nature of Stinson's disappearance, they thought, he would have had more to say about it; but he had a secret to keep, and was silent.

Bill Dare's ignorance was at least temporary bliss. If he had known the views of his comrades in regard to him, he would have been badly frightened, and would have felt that

considerations of safety required him to put a long distance between him and them. As he thought of nothing but his lost treasure, there was no other trouble that touched him.

Again he slipped out of camp, crossed through the timber, and ascended the terraced side of the mountain. There was no one to follow him this time; but he proceeded with the same caution that he had used on former occasions.

As he entered the well-remembered valley, there was no ghost of a dead Comanche to rise up and warn him back. Rube Warnick had removed all traces of the encounter in which Rafe Stinson lost his life, as if he might want to play another little game, and there was nothing to startle the searcher for lost treasure, or to turn him from his purpose.

Yes; there was one thing that troubled him. As he carefully looked about, before walking around the lake, he thought that he caught a glimpse, over his right shoulder, of the new moon.

This caused him uneasiness for two reasons. He believed it to be a very bad sign, a sure omen of ill luck that his first sight of the new moon should be over his right shoulder. It was also a bad sign that he should see the new moon at all. If the moon was visible, at that hour of the night, the change must have taken place several days back, and it was then too late to expect a visit from the spirit that was to reveal the hiding-place of the treasure.

Nevertheless, he went on. It might not be absolutely necessary that he should be on the spot exactly at the time of the change, and he was by no means certain that he had seen the new moon. He looked for it again, but it was no longer visible.

He made the circuit of the lake, carefully looked about him again, and entered the stone hut. All traces of the fire of the previous night had been removed, and the cards that had been scattered on the ground had been gathered up and taken away. Bill Dare laid down, and composed himself to sleep.

He did sleep. For the first time during his many visits to that place, sleep closed his eyelids, and he dreamed.

In his dream he saw the same vision that had appeared to him twice. The third time, he thought, would break the

charm, and he was joyful in the belief that the hiding-place of the treasure would now be revealed to him. The vision—a figure in white—beckoned to him, as if to call him up and lead him to the spot for which he had so long sought in vain.

He awoke with a start, and rushed out of the hut, rubbing his eyes.

It was there! Near the head of the valley, just at the edge of the lake, dimly seen in the darkness, was a female figure, that stood and beckoned to him.

He felt a sense of awe, if it was not fear, as he actually beheld, for the first time, the object that had thrice visited him in dreams. He rubbed his eyes vigorously, to make sure that he was not still dreaming, shook off his fear, and hastened toward the figure.

As he advanced, it receded, still beckoning him on, and glided around the edge of the lake to the other side, where it went close up under the edge of the cliff, stopped at a niche in the rock, and pointed to the ground.

Bill Dare approached slowly, fearful of getting too near to the specter, and it slowly moved away, still pointing backward, and beckoning no longer. When the old man reached the spot at which the figure pointed, it suddenly vanished.

Bill Dare must have recognized the spot, for he uttered a joyful cry, sunk upon his knees, and fell to digging madly in the soft ground with his knife.

He was so absorbed in this labor, that he did not see two figures that stepped out from the shadow of the cliff, nor did he hear them as they slowly glided toward him, and took their stations just behind him.

He had no intimation of their presence, until he was seized from behind by a powerful man, whose grasp he found it impossible to shake off. Then his arms were quickly and tightly bound behind his back, and he was raised to his feet.

Looking about, he recognized his captors as Charley Archer and Tophet—the young man and the big negro who had passed a night at his tavern.

“What do you mean by this?” he asked, in indignation and terror. “What right have you to take me and tie me? What have I ever done to you?”

"Nothing at all," replied the young gentleman. "We have got you, though, and we mean to keep you; you may be sure of that. If you will come with us peaceably, you will not be hurt."

Archer took him by one arm, and Tophet by the other, and they led him back to the hut, which they forced him to enter.

They went in with him, and Charley Archer seated the prisoner on the ground, with his back against the wall, while Tophet hastened to build a fire, which soon blazed up brightly, illuminating the rude building with a ruddy glare.

By its light Bill Dare saw the giant form of the negro, bending over the fire, and Charley Archer standing opposite to him, with the figure of the vision at his side. He trembled at the sight of the white figure, but looked at it again, and recognized the face and form of Nell Dare. Nelly's waist was encircled by the arm of the young gentleman, and she leaned against him as if she looked to him for love and protection. It was evident there was a good understanding between those two.

Bill Dare, nevertheless, who did not comprehend these proceedings, and who had a vague fear that some harm was intended him, or that he was being found out, resolved to make an appeal to Nelly, hoping that she might extricate him from what he believed to be a perilous position.

"Is that you, my child?" he asked. "How did you get here, and what have you to do with that stranger? It can't be that you will join with these people against your poor old father."

"It is useless to speak to her in that way," said Archer. "It is not likely that she has any more affection for you than you have for her. If you really cared for her, you would never have consented to marry her to Rafe Stinson, whom you know to be a mean and murderous villain."

"How did you know that?" exclaimed Dare, as his red face grew white, and his small eyes opened wide. "I was driven to that, stranger. Rafe knew somethin' ag'inst me that would have killed me, that would have been worse than a hanging matter, and I promised him for the sake of keeping his mouth shut. But I never meant to keep that promise, and I was glad enough when the gal got away."

"I know that you would have forced her to marry him if

you had not been too much of a coward. If you were glad at her escape, it seems strange that you should have been so ready to help him pursue her."

"I was driven to that too."

"You must be easily driven. But that is of no consequence now, as Stinson is dead."

"Dead! Did you kill him?"

"No. He was killed by one of those Comanches who escaped to the hills after the fight with your people. We will drop him, Bill Dare, and speak of yourself. Do you want to know why I have caught you and tied you and brought you here?"

"Of course I do, and I want to know what right you have to do it."

"The right that every man has to catch a rogue. I have caught you, and I mean to keep you until you are willing to tell the truth."

"About what?"

"The truth about this young lady. I know that she is not your daughter. I know that your name is William Nevins and that you were once overseer on the plantation of Colonel Worsham, in Louisiana. I know that you ran away from Louisiana, many years ago, taking with you Colonel Worsham's little daughter, May, and about twenty thousand dollars in money. I know a great deal more about you than I learned from your former partner, Paul Land-den. I knew that I would find you here about the change of the moon, and for what purpose you were coming. I have been waiting here for you, and have found you, and now I want you to confess these things."

"If I do what you want me to do, will you let me go?"

"That is a question for Colonel Worsham to decide. He will soon be here, and you must confess to him."

"I don't mean to say anything about it, unless you agree to let me go."

"Very well, my friend. Take your time about it. I won't hurry you. I will only say that the truth must come out, before I am done with you. Tophet, I will leave this man in your charge. Come, Nelly; day is breaking; let us go and look for Rube Warnick."

It was already day, outside of the valley, and into its depths the light had penetrated sufficiently to render its rude outline clearly discernible. Nelly, who was standing at the door of the hut, uttered an exclamation of surprise, and seized Archer by his coat-sleeve.

"Come here!" she said. "Stand at my side. Not quite so close. I see it all quite distinctly. I remember it as if it had happened but yesterday. I was a little girl, and I stood here, in the door of the little stone house. It was raining—a drizzling sort of rain. He"—she nodded her head at Bill Dare—"had been drinking a great deal, and he staggered over there with a heavy load on his shoulder. He buried it right under the rocks yonder—do you see the place I am pointing at? It is the very spot to which I led him. How strange that is."

"I noticed," said Archer, "that he was very joyful when he reached that place, and that he acted as if the memory of it had suddenly come back to him."

"There is no doubt of it, Charley. If there is any money buried, it is buried in that place. When I stand here in the door, it all comes back to me, and I remember what happened when I stood here many years ago."

"No confession will be needed, you see," said Archer, looking back at Bill Dare, and speaking to him. "If we find the money when we dig over yonder, we will know that this young lady is May Worsham. It will then be proved—though for my part, I don't need any proof—that she is the same one who was here when you buried the money, and it has already been proved that that one was May Worsham. But I will have a confession from you, all the same."

Bill Dare hung his head, and gritted his teeth; while Charley Archer and Nelly left the hut, and walked toward the entrance to the valley.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

ARCHER and Nell Dare were a long time in reaching the entrance to the valley. There was such a very good understanding between them, and they had so much to say to each other, that their progress was slow; every now and then, there was something of such importance to be said, that they were obliged to stop to say it, and their heads inclined toward each other, as if what they had to say was a great secret, and their lips touched, as if it could only be said in that way.

Very close and tender confidences were these, showing that Charley Archer had felt more than an ordinary solicitude for the young girl whom he had found at Dare's tavern—showing, too, that Nelly was joyful in the prospect of finding and meeting her parents, and still more joyful in the certainty of loving and being loved.

Such moments are blissful indeed, and it is no wonder that they are prolonged to their utmost extent, as they come but once in a lifetime.

When the lovers reached the place at which they were to wait for Rube Warnick, they had not long to wait. The trapper's head was soon thrust from behind one of the rocks at the entrance, and he surprised them in the act of exchanging one of those tender confidences of which mention has been made.

"That's right!" he exclaimed, slapping the butt of his rifle with his brawny hand. "Makes me feel as ef I'd like to be young ag'in."

They fell apart a little, blushing as he spoke, and Archer stepped forward and grasped his hand.

"What is the news?" asked the young man. "Where is the train?"

"Right down here, my boy—jest at the foot of the hill."

"Indeed! I had not expected them so soon. What has become of the Texans?"

"Scattered—vamosed—cleared out—mizzled—put."

"What has happened to stampede 'them?"

"A lot of Regulator chaps kim up from below, huntin' 'em. They say that Rafe Stinson and his gang hev been carryin' on things in their own way rayther too long, and that the time had come to clean them out. They stopped at the tavern, and burned it, and made that p'ison old squaw git up and dust, and then they followed the trail of the gang up to the hills. The roughs got wind of it, and lit out, so that on'y two or three of 'em were caught. Cap'n Burnham kim up with the Regulators, and says that he wishes, now, that he'd kep' his ranch. He wouldn't hev sold out, ef he hadn't been skeered by Stinson's gang. Hows'ever, the ranch is all ready for Kurnel Worsham's people, and all we've got to do is to go straight down thar."

"You bring good news; but I have better news than that."

"What's up? Hev you got the old cuss?"

"Yes, and it is certain that this young lady is May Worsham, and I know where to look for the missing money. Come with me and help me dig. If we find the money, I will want no further proof."

Archer led the way to the place at which Nelly had pointed from the door of the little stone house. It was in a sort of niche in the rock, at the foot of the cliff, and was the same place to which Nelly had led Bill Dare, and where the old man had so eagerly commenced digging with his knife.

The two men began to dig, with their knives and hands, while Nelly stood near and watched them eagerly.

Soon they reached a pile of gold pieces. The money had originally been packed in canvas bags; but they had rotted, leaving it mingled with the earth.

Archer hastened to the hut, and brought Bill Dare and Tophet to the spot.

"You see that I need no further proof," he said, as he showed the old man the heap of gold. "May Worsham was here when you hid that money, and May Worsham remembered where it was buried. You see that your confession is not needed, but you will be obliged to make it."

As they had no sacks in which they could carry the gold, Archer and Warnick and Tophet loaded themselves with as

much of it as they could carry in their pockets, and set out to descend the mountain with their captive.

Bill Dare's hands were untied, and Wolf was detailed to act as his guard. The dog understood his business, and it needed but a glance to assure Bill Dare that he would be pounced upon if he should attempt to escape.

Soon they reached the camp at the foot of the hills, where Charley and Tophet were joyfully received by all.

"This is your daughter. This is May Worsham," said Archer, as he led Nelly to where Colonel Worsham and his wife were standing.

"It is! It is!" exclaimed Mrs. Worsham, who clasped the girl in her arms, and sobbed in the fullness of her joy. "I know her! I could not be deceived in her! She is my own child! You need tell me nothing more!"

"If you need proof, I have plenty of it," said Charley, when this excitement had subsided. "Here is evidence," he continued, drawing a handful of gold from his pocket, "that would convince almost anybody. It is bright and solid enough, you must admit. Here is William Nevins, who will make a full and free confession of his share in the matter, as soon as he gets ready to do so; but I beg that you will not hurry him, as we are not in need of any information from him."

Colonel Worsham recognized his runaway overseer, and spoke to him; but Bill Dare made no reply, except to declare that they would get nothing out of him, unless they should promise to let him go.

Archer, who was smiling at the dogged determination of the prisoner, felt some one touch him on the arm.

Turning around, he found himself confronted by the leader of the Regulators, whose countenance looked strangely familiar to him.

"I perceive that you don't quite recognize me," said the Regulator; "but I remember you very well. I have greatly changed, no doubt, since you saw me. My name is Paul Landsden."

"You have changed wonderfully," said Archer, grasping his hand. "You were then not expected to live."

"But I did live, in spite of all. William Nevins knows me,

I am sure, and I can supply any links that may be missing in your chain of evidence, if he is unwilling to confess."

But Nevins, seeing that he could gain nothing by holding out any longer, professed himself willing to make a clean breast of it, and made a full confession, by which he only confirmed Archer and his friends in what they already believed.

As he threw himself upon their mercy, a sort of council was convened, for the purpose of deciding his fate.

As the women were members of the council, the question was soon settled, Nelly's vote being at once given in favor of the prisoner. It was agreed that he should be set free, and furnished with a horse and arms and provisions, on condition that he would leave that part of the country and never return to it. Bill Dare was glad to accept this condition, and as he did not like the looks that some of the Regulators cast upon him, he lost no time in taking himself away, and was never heard of afterward.

Rube Warnick was sent up into the mountains with a party, to bring down the remainder of the buried gold, which was safely packed in the wagons when it was received. The horses that had been left in the hills were also brought down, and then the whole party, including Captain Burnham and Paul Landsden and the company of Regulators, broke up their camp, and set out in a southerly direction.

The next day they arrived at Vallecito, where all were hospitably entertained by Captain Burnham, until he completed the transfer of his ranch to Colonel Worsham, who then acted as host to those who remained.

When Colonel Worsham and his family were fairly settled in their new abode, Tom Worsham became impatient for his marriage with Emma Langley—lest, as he said, she might lose him again—and a day was fixed for the ceremony.

This example being contagious, Charley Archer, after several consultations with May Worsham, made an application to her father that nearly concerned her.

"As property that has been found rightfully belongs to the finder," said the Colonel, "and as you found both May and the money that Nevins stole, I must give them both up to you. The money will buy and stock a farm, and you will

know well enough, I suppose, what to do with May. For my part, I shall never cease to bless the day when I brought home my cousin's orphan boy, and promised to take care of him."

THE END.

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